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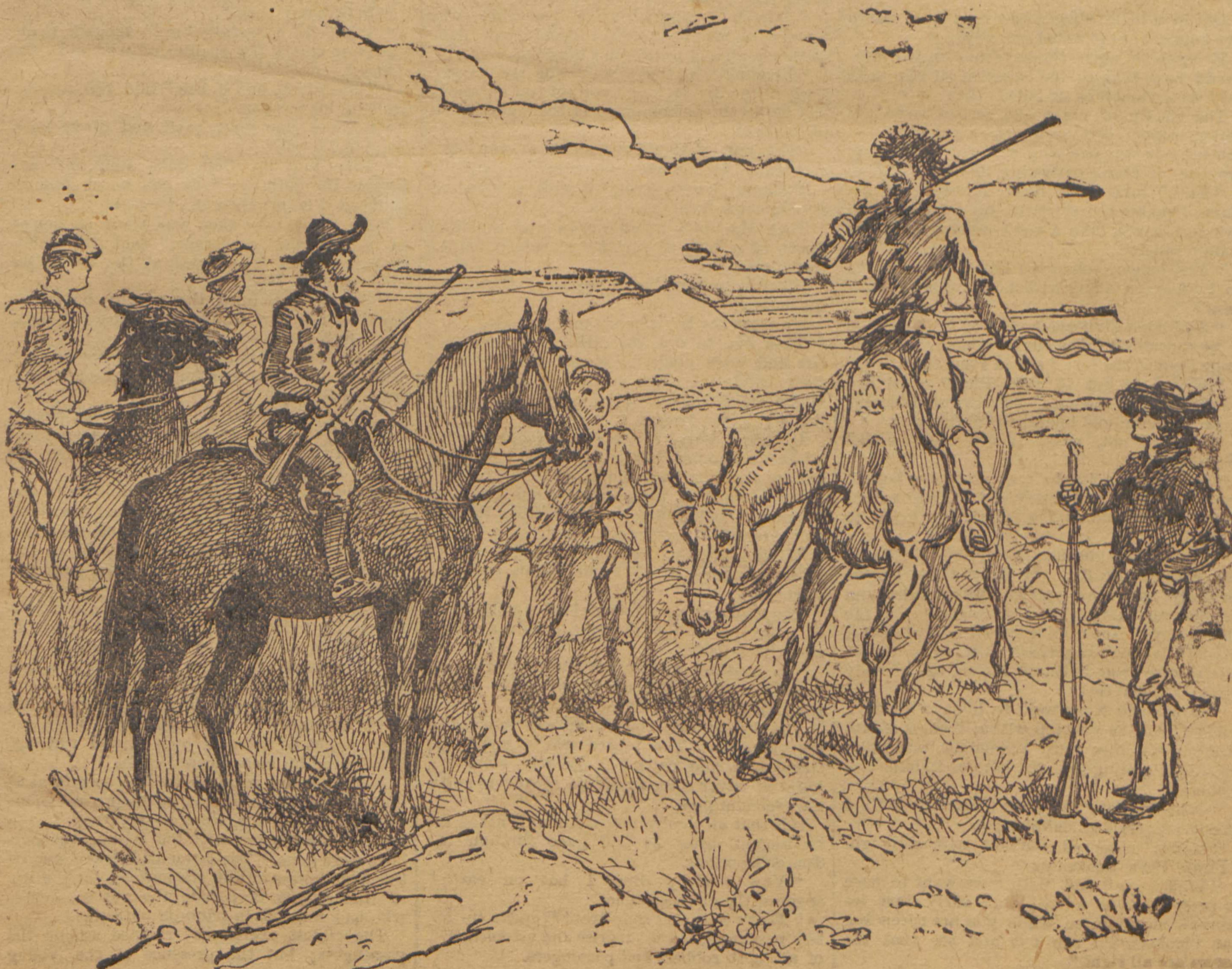
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Vol. L.

DARE-DEVIL DAN, THE YOUNG PRAIRIE RANGER;
Or, OLD ROSEBUD'S BOY BRIGADE.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.



"I SAY, BOYS, THIS 'ERE LITTLE SNIPE'S THE GINOINE, UNADULTERATED DARE-DEVIL DAN BRADY."

Dare-Devil Dan,

The Young Prairie Ranger;

OR,
Old Rosebud's Boy Brigade.

A ROMANCE OF THE UPPER CHEYENNE.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "THE DUMB SPY," "KEEN KNIFE,"
"LASSO JACK," "THE BORDER
KING," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BOY BRIGADE.

THERE were five of them—all hale and hearty young fellows upon whose sun-brown faces shone a light indicative of reckless, daring spirits.

Scott Vail was twenty years of age and the eldest of the five. He was a tall, handsome fellow with a keen gray eye, clear-cut features, and a mouth, the expression of which was evidence of an indomitable will.

Frank Bartlett was eighteen.

Philip Gregg was seventeen.

Pat Eagan was seventeen, of Irish extraction, and withal, a "broth of a boy."

Sol Warren was nineteen, and a young Hercules in stature and strength.

Scott Vail was the accepted leader of the party.

All were dressed in the garb of hunters.

They were encamped upon the banks of Grand river in Dakota. Rifles of the latest and most improved kind were lying around camp, and five belts, each containing two revolvers, were hanging upon a bush hard by.

Out in a little glade a few rods from camp five horses were picketed out to grass.

Everything about the boys and their camps would have told, to the experienced eye, that they were amateurs, as indeed they were.

The shades of night had settled over the valley, supper had been dispatched, and the boy brigade was reclining under the spreading branches of a tree discussing its future course.

"This," said Scott Vail, referring to his diary, "makes the thirtieth day we have been out, and it will take a week yet to reach the buffalo range."

"Yes, longer," observed Phil Gregg, "if we go blundering along without a guide or compass."

"And it's a devilish mess of fools we'd be if wees couldn't foller our own noses 'long the stage road to the fort," put in Pat Eagan.

"When we get to Fort Rice," continued young Vail, "I am sure we'll have no difficulty in procuring an old hunter for a guide."

"And if not, what then?" inquires Sol Warren.

"Why, I'm going to push on to the buffalo grounds," declares Scott Vail. "I started out to shoot a buffalo, and a buffalo I'm going to shoot."

"That's the gospel, Scotty, me boy," said Pat enthusiastically. "Och! and havn't we alreadly had fine sport killing deers and elks on the Loups, and antelopes on the plains, hey? Nor devil the guide did we have, either! Whoop! begorras! I begins to feel as though mees war Patrick Eagan, the bloody Pirate o' the West!"

"It will do very well to hunt without a guide as long as we keep within bounds of civilization, but you must remember, boys, that we're now getting into the land of Indians and robbers."

"Och! and may the saints keep us from them bloody riggers!" exclaimed Pat.

"Hullo!" observed Bartlett with a laugh, "Pirate Pat's weakening."

"Well, boys," said Vail, "we want to turn in pretty soon so as to get an early start to-morrow morning; so, while you are spreading our blankets, I'll run out and see that the ~~boys~~ are all right."

So saying, Scott turned and moved away through the dense dark woods. He soon came to a little opening in which the horses were at grass. Advancing he examined the picket pin of each and finding them all right, was about to retrace his steps to camp when his ears were greeted by a sound like the rattle of wheels and the clattering of hoofs combined. The sound was just audible, but after listening a few moments he became satisfied that it was made by the east bound stage plying between Deadwood and Fort Rice.

The stage road was about forty rods further on from camp, but impelled by curiosity the young man crossed the opening and entering the darkness hurried on in hopes of getting a glimpse of the stage before it passed by.

The moon was in the zenith and a line of light falling to earth before him told where the road lay. Just within the darkness at the roadside Vail stopped, bent his head and listened. He could hear the noise of the approaching stage quite distinctly now, but high above that he suddenly heard a voice ring out:

"Halt there!"

Instantly, almost, the stage came to a stand not over twenty yards from where young Vail stood, and peering through the bushes he saw five gleaming gun-barrels in the hands of five masked men pointed full at the breast of the driver.

Full well the young hunter knew the meaning of what he saw; the stage had been stopped by road-agents.

"Don't you move a muscle or you're a dead man!" he heard one of the outlaws say to the driver.

Involuntarily Scott Vail's hand sought his revolver, and not until that moment did he discover that he had left them at camp.

"What's wrong, Jim?" a passenger was heard to shout to the driver, opening the door of the coach and putting his head out.

"Road-agents, that's all," was the laconic reply of the driver, who upon several occasions had halted at the command of these gentlemen of the road.

"Git out of there, every one of you—one at a time," commanded the outlaw leader.

Muttered curses, mingled with a woman's shriek, came from the coach.

Then the door swung open and the lithe figure of a boy, of perhaps seventeen, leaped to the ground.

"Throw up your hands, my lark!" thundered the outlaw.

Up went the boy's hands in a twinkle.

Then one by one the other passengers got out and were made to stand in a line with their hands up. The sixth and last one to alight was a woman—a young girl, who fainting, fell to the ground.

Unthoughtedly, the boy passenger started to her assistance, but a fierce oath from an outlaw sent him back into line.

Not a word of remonstrance nor a petition for mercy could Scott Vail hear from the lips of the terrified passengers.

While four of the outlaws covered the party with their guns, the fifth one began the work of robbery.

The first man's pockets yielded a goodly sum of money, a loaded revolver, a silver watch, and a jack-knife.

"Is that all you've got about you worth mentioning?" asked the out'aw, as he placed the articles in a pair of saddle-bags.

The second and third man was relieved of his valuables. The fourth was a stout old German, whose capacious pockets yielded a purse of silver coin, a pair of revolvers and a meerschaum pipe.

"Is that all you've got, old man?" asked the road-agent, after he had gone through the Teuton's pockets.

"Yaw—effery ding I has on earth!" snapped the old passenger.

"That's a lie, old sour-kraut!" spoke up the boy-passenger, to the surprise and astonishment of all, both robbers and passengers.

"What do you mean, sir?" thundered the outlaw chief.

"What I say; that Dutchman told you a fib. He's got a boss gold watch in his boot-leg."

"Hullo! that boy's been to Sunday school, Cap," exclaimed an outlaw, "and can't even hear a lie told."

"He ish one leetle confederit mit dese bloody robbers!" declared the Dutchman, fairly grinding his teeth.

The boy laughed in a strange, boyish way.

The German was compelled to pull off his boots, which not only brought to light a fine chronometer, but something over a thousand dollars in greenbacks. The old fellow became almost frantic, as he saw his valuables go down the capacious maw of the outlaw's saddle-bags.

The boy was the last to receive the attention of the outlaws.

"Mister," he said, "I haven't a thing 'bout me but two dollars, all I had left after buying my passage to the fort. I'm poor'n a church society, and I want to make a raise. I'll tell you what I'll do; if you'll let me go along with you and learn to be a bloody road-agent, I'll tell you where you can get some more riches—lots of it. I alers wanted to be a bold, darin' road-agent, and so run off from home and come up here to learn. I kalculated to rob this stage myself afore we got to Rice, if you hadn't."

"If you know where there's anything of value, out with it. We make no compromises with boys," returned the outlaw chief, in a prompt, business-like tone.

"S'posen I refuse?"

"Then I'll blow your head off," and he laid his hand on his revolver, and fixed his eyes upon the boy.

"Blow away then."

"What a desperate boy!" thought Scott Vail, who was still a spellbound witness to the robbery.

"Tell—quick, or I'll fire," said the outlaw, drawing his weapon.

"Let me jine your band, and divvy with me, and I'll tell."

"Take him up, Cap, take him up!" exclaimed the outlaws; "we can knock him in the head if he proves a dead weight."

"All right, boy; then you shall be one of us, you young desperado," said the chief, pleased, as well as amazed, at the deliberate coolness of the boy.

"Good!" exclaimed the youth; "now, if you'll look in that Dutchman's tobacco-pouch, you'll find a nice wad of riches."

The outlaw did so and found the boy had not deceived him—another roll of National Bank notes came to light.

"Now, then," said the cold-blooded young wretch, "this here young gal's got a spankin' fine gold ring, and if I'm to be one of you, let me try my hand on her."

And so saying he advanced quickly to the side of the girl, who by this time had recovered from her swoon and was standing near the coach, and taking her trembling hand in his, ruthlessly snatched the golden circlet from her finger.

This act, more than all others he had witnessed, fired the blood in Scott Vail's veins. It aroused him to a sense of the fact that he had spent precious moments in inactivity—moments that would have sufficed for him to have gone back to camp and brought his comrades to the assistance of the passengers. Even yet there might be time, he thought, and turning, he retraced his steps toward camp.

But the young man's delay had been fatal to the passengers in so far as their possessions were concerned, for, when he returned to the scene of the robbery with his friends, the outlaws were gone. The latter had taken one of the stage horses out of the harness for the use of that young desperado, the boy passenger, who had gone off in triumph with them.

The wildest excitement reigned among the passengers; but the presence of the young

hunters relieved them, to a great extent, of their fears.

Scott Vail invited them to spend the night with them in their bivouac.

Jim Floss, the stage-driver, proposed to go on with three horses if the passengers so desired; but the latter preferred to wait until morning, when all could proceed together; so the conveyance was pulled around to the camp and the horses unharnessed.

A fire was lighted to dispel the gloom. Its light revealed the faces of an excited and dejected crowd. The old German's face was knotted with what seemed the pangs of mortal agony, and his ravings and outbursts of anger were almost demoniacal. But the white face of the girl passenger touched the hearts of the young hunters. It was the fair and lovely face of a girl of seventeen—one upon whom the boys looked with wonder and admiration, and in their heart of hearts swore to die in her defense should the sacrifice be demanded.

The m—on clung close at her father's side for even the assurance of their present safety did not seem to relieve her of some vague uneasiness.

Thomas Field, the father of the girl, was a man of forty. His general appearance was that of a laboring man. His face was covered with a brown beard. His eyes were of a dull gray. In short, his features were, in a measure, devoid of that expression of intellectuality so prominent in the face of his daughter, Adrian.

After the general excitement had somewhat abated, the passengers and the boys seated themselves around the camp-fire to talk over the robbery.

"We had just been talking," said one of the passengers, "about the warm reception we would give a band of road-agents should they attack us. But I find talk is one thing and business another."

"What makes me so awful madt as to mos' kick myse'f out dis cuss ole country," said Luke Melcher, the German, "ish dot tamated poy mit dem shleepy eyes. Mein Cott in Himmel! Shust t'ink ob dat poy, peoples! He gits in mit us at Deadwood—he rides 'long mit us never sayin' noddings much, but set der' mit dem, leetle shleepy eyes lookin' like one blind shackass, and den turn out as he did—shust gives me all away to dem robbers! Oh, I ish a beggar! my watch, my moneys and mine pipe are all gone to ter tuyvil. Py shimmery! I leaves dish countrry and goes back to my own native land if I has to walk every sthep of der vay!"

"There is something queer about that confounded boy," said another passenger; "he seemed a rather dull fellow all the time. He hadn't much to say, and seemed half asleep most of the time, but I'm convinced now he was the most wide-awake man on the coach. I believe he is a confederate of them outlaws, and by some means gave the signal for the attack."

Thus the conversation ran on until midnight. Finally all laid down to rest but the young hunters who were placed on guard.

Adrian Field was provided with a comfortable couch in the stage, where she rested but could not sleep.

The young hunters shared their blankets with the passengers.

By daylight all was life and bustle in the camp, and just as the sun came up the coach moved out of the grove and on toward Fort Rice escorted by the five young hunters.

They had journeyed but a short distance when they were joined by another person, who, mounted upon a lean yet nimble-looking mule, rode from the woods on the left leading a pack-horse that was loaded down with all sorts of trappings.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Jim Floss, the driver, "if it isn't Old Rosebud Ben, Satan's a fraud!"

"That's who I be, my gay ribboneer. How d'ye do, gentlefolks?" and the queer-looking old borderman doffed his coon-skin to the

young hunters and the eager faces looking from the coach.

"Good-morning, Rosebud," replied the hunters, who had caught the name given by Floss.

"You all seem to be out in the fresh o' mornin'—must 'a' bunked near, eh?" observed the old man; then looking up at Floss, he continued: "How's it you're only driven three hosses, Jim?—one o' them kicked out o' the breechin'?"

"Kicked out o' nothin'," replied the driver; "one of my passengers rode him off, the infernal little road-agent!"

"What? Had a call from the light-fingers?"

"I should smile," was the facetious Jim's reply.

At this juncture the old German let loose, and for five minutes swore and raved like a madman.

Finally Mr. Deering, one of the passengers, told Old Rosebud the story of their robbery and the strange conduct of that sleepy-looking boy.

To the surprise of all Old Rosebud burst into a roar of laughter, and his mule catching the spirit, brayed lustily.

"And ye say the boy war a drowsy-lookin' cub, eh?"

"Yes," replied Deering, wondering what Rosebud could see in the affair to laugh at.

"Say, folks, lookee here," said Old Ben, thrusting his long, bony finger out toward the passengers, "do you know who and what that boy might be?"

"A better boy," said one of the passengers.

"Der tuyvil's own brat!" snapped the German.

"Whoa, Baalbec," exclaimed Old Rosebud to his mule, which had suddenly lifted its ears in a significant manner, "what d'ye see, eh? Aha! A horseman, folks. Lookey yander! D'ye see him flyin' this way?"

Everybody answered in the affirmative, for down over the great plain that now lay before them, they saw a horseman riding at a furious speed, and on behind, apparently in pursuit, came several others.

"Down behind the hill—quick, Jim!" commanded Old Ben.

In a few moments all were concealed from view of the approaching horsemen.

Old Rosebud dismounted, and, with his rifle in hand, crept up the hill until he could see over the plain. The party watched his movements as half-crouching he held his rifle at a trail.

Suddenly the foremost horseman appears in sight at the upper end of the ridge. Old Rosebud straightens up his form. The horseman gallops toward him, and finally drawing rein before him, slips from the saddle to the ground. Then the astonished watchers see the horseman take Rosebud's rifle and kneel at the feet of the old hunter.

All is breathless silence in the valley below.

"By Jerusalem crickets!" suddenly exclaims Jim Floss, "that's the hoss the outlaws took from me last night, or I'm a goat!"

"And that boy then's got his head broke," observed Deering.

"Bless Gott!" says Melcher, rubbing his hands gleefully.

A little cry breaks from Adrian's lips, and she look's away toward the hill.

Still all eyes are fixed upon the hunter and horseman. They see the latter kneeling, take aim at something beyond and fire.

Then the two quickly rise to their feet and start toward the coach. They move rapidly, leading the panting, foam-flecked horse.

"Look out down thar," suddenly shouts Old Rosebud. "Road-agents are comin'!"

"My God! again?" cries a passenger.

Quickly the young hunters draw their weapons and prepare for the conflict.

The next moment four horsemen rise into view above the crest of the hill, but at sight of those in the valley they check their horses and turn to the right.

In an instant he whom the outlaws had been

pursuing was in his saddle, and looking toward the coach, shouted in a clear, ringing voice, magnetic in its martial tones:

"Horsemen, come help me in the pursuit of those villains!"

"Go, boys!" shouts Old Rosebud, "and follow the bravest boy on earth, Dare-Devil Dan!"

As if impelled by some irresistible influence, the young hunters dash away after the youth whose name to them was nothing new, yet whose existence they had regarded only in the wildest romance.

On over the plain they speed. Their horses being fresh, they soon come up with the ranger, but they cannot pass him—they cannot see his face. On they dash. They are gaining rapidly upon the outlaws, whose horses were well-nigh exhausted when they became the pursued. Only a hundred yards intervene, when the pursuer's open fire upon them with their revolvers.

The fugitives hear the whistling bullets and know that there is no other alternative but for them to fight. So they draw rein, turn and face the advancing foe with drawn weapons. A sharp revolver fight ensues. Frank Bartlett's arm drops at his side disabled by an outlaw bullet. Dare-Devil Dan's horse goes down with a wild scream of pain, but in an instant the boy—for such he is—is upon his feet and foremost in the fight. But before the conflict has fairly begun, it has ended, and the freebooters are lying prone upon the earth dead or dying.

And now, for the first time, the young amateur hunters look upon the face of their unknown leader in the conflict—into the wonderful eyes of that wonderful boy, Dare-Devil Dan!

And to his utmost surprise—yea, astonishment, Scott Vail saw that he was the boy who had helped the road-agents rob his fellow-passengers the night before—he who had stripped the circlet of gold from the fair Adrian's finger!

CHAPTER II.

THE AMATEURS SECURE A GUIDE.

OLD ROSEBUD BEN, mounted upon his mule, rode up to where the amateurs and Dare-Devil Dan stood conversing by the dead outlaws.

"Hooray for you, Dare-Devil Dan!" he shouted, "you're still up to your old tricks, arn't ye?—went thro' em like a brindle bull 'ith a curl in his for'ed, didn't ye? I say, boys, this 'ere little snipe's the ginoowine, unadulterated Dare-Devil Dan Brady—you've all hearn o' that animal, havn't ye?"

"Yes, indeed," replied young Vail, "but I never believed there was such a fellow. But, say, this young gent was one of the passengers on the coach last night and yet he helped to rob his fellow-passengers. I don't understand it."

"Spect not," replied Old Rosebud, "it takes sixteen constitootional lawyers to understand him; but he can explain it—I never see'd him in a scrape yet but what he could lie cuten it jist as easy as slidin' on ice. Come now, Danyil, stand up, yer little sinner, and make a clean breast o' yer sins, or by thunder in the mountain, you can't go into my society any longer. 'Splain yer double dealin's with them passengers and these robbers, or I'll have Baalbec fan you in the face with his off heel."

"Give me a chance then, will you?" said the young ranger: "now you know, or ought to, that there was a big reward offered for Fenn Wier, the boss road-agent of these parts, dead or alive."

"I should say I heard sich a thing intimated a thousand times or so," observed Old Rosebud facetiously.

"Well, the reward's mine," continued Dan; "Wier lies out yonder deader'n the mother of Adam. This is why I done as I did—to get into the good favor of the outlaws. The officers o' the stage-company know what my plans were, although they just swore I'd come out at the little end of the horn in takin'

in Fenn Wier who'd got away 'ith so many men. And what's more, folks, every dollar and every jewel taken from them passengers last night are in them saddle-bags on that dead horse, and will be returned to their owners. Is this satisfactory, men?"

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the amateurs, and then each advanced and shook the hand of the daring, desperate youth.

Leaving the dead outlaws the party returned to the stage.

All the passengers, except Adrian Field, were standing outside upon the ground.

The old German was still waxing wroth, and the approach of that "shleepy-eyed poy" almost threw him into a fit of rage.

"You leetle thief!" he roared, making a fearful lunge at the boy. "I pees shustified in bu'sting your head dose very minit!"

Dan eluded his blow, laughing in the German's face.

"Old sour-kraut," the youth said, "you needn't bu'st yourself flounderin' round here like a blind bull. I've brought your watch and gold all back to you."

"Mein Gott! ish dat so?"

"Course it is," put in Rosebud Ben; "that boy's no thief, but a bang-up, royal little dare-devil of a prairie ranger. He's Dare-Devil Dan, hisself."

"Py shimmey frost!" exclaimed the German, altering his tone and attitude. "I says all 'long to dis Dutchman dat dat shleepy-eyed poy vas no fool, and if I gits my moneys and my vatch all pack, I believes I told dis Dutchman der truth—if I no gits my moneys and vatch, den I haf told dis Dutchman one pig lie, hey?"

"That's a queer argymint," said Dan as he seated himself on the ground, opened the saddle-bags and began to take therefrom the articles and money belonging to the passengers.

The old German fairly cried with joy when he received his money back—every dollar of it.

Adrian's ring was the last article restored. With a smile upon his face the youth advanced to the coach, and taking her hand replaced the golden circlet upon the finger from which he had taken it.

"I hope now you will forgive me, Miss Field," he said; "you see the end justified the means."

Every youth present would have given his good right hand to have stood before so fair a being as Adrian Field in the light that Dan did—a daring, dashing young hero. Scott Vail, more than all others, envied Dan the looks of admiration the maiden bestowed upon him, for, in the short time they had journeyed together, young Vail had learned to love Adrian Field.

The body of the outlaw chief, Fenn Wier, was brought to the stage, and, wrapped in a blanket, placed on top of the vehicle to be taken to Fort Rice for identification before the reward could be obtained.

Then the stage resumed its journey, its escort now being increased by Dare-Devil Dan and Old Rosebud Ben, and but for the presence of the lifeless form on the deck the balance of the trip would have been a pleasant and merry journey.

In due course of time the party reached the fort and the news of the death of Fenn Wier was received with joy; and Dare-Devil Dan became the hero of the hour, though Old Rosebud and the amateurs came in for their share of the honors in the fight with the freebooters.

During their sojourn together Dan and Rosebud had formed such a warm attachment for the amateur hunters that, when the latter started for the buffalo range from the fort, they made up their minds to go with them.

Thus with Rosebud Ben and Dare-Devil Dan as guides, a royal good time was promised.

CHAPTER III.

AN APPEAL FOR HELP.

It is two weeks later and the scene of our story has changed.

Through the valley of the upper Cheyenne seven horsemen, with two led horses loaded down with camp equipages, are making their way at an easy gait. They are the amateur hunters led by Old Rosebud and Dare-Devil Dan.

A subject that had been discussed a dozen times since leaving Fort Rice is again the theme of conversation. And that subject is the quiet and mysterious manner in which Adrian Field and her father had disappeared from the fort soon after their arrival there. The mystery seems to be wearing heavily upon the minds of Dare-Devil Dan and Scott Vail, for they are not in their wonted spirits. But it is an easy matter for their comrades to see wherein lies the trouble: both were in love with the fair Adrian.

"Rosebud," Dan finally said, "what is your theory of their disappearance? I've never heard you express your opinion on the subject yet. Come, tell us what you think."

"I should observate," said Old Rosebud, with a twinkle in his eye, "that the gal came to the conclusion that some o' you young animals had become spooney on her, and so she took it into her wise little head to take her dad and skip out unbeknowenced to any one. It was cruel in her to mash up a lot o' brave and splendorific young hearts, but gals are crueler than pizen when they want to be. And then it might be a case o' foul play—in fact, looks the most probable o' the two."

There was little consolation to Scott and Dan in Rosebud's words. The disappointment they felt was great, for on their arrival at Fort Rice they had hoped to be able to improve their acquaintance with Adrian. However, neither one suspected the other of his admiration for the fair girl until she had disappeared. Then there could be no grounds for jealousy and the search, that lasted several days, for her was one of mutual interest, and when it proved unsuccessful, and they finally set out for the buffalo range, their heaviness of heart was shared by each other.

On the fourth day out from the fort they camped on the Cheyenne river at the mouth of a large creek. Evidence of a party having been in camp there recently was found hard by. There was the ashes of their fire, the tracks made by booted feet and by horses. Old Rosebud thought a party of hunters had been camped there, but in this Dare-Devil Dan did not concur. He believed a band of outlaws had been there.

This difference led to another as to the course they should now pursue to reach the best buffalo hunting. If the party were hunters and they had continued on up the river, then it would be best for them to go up the creek, and vice versa. But if it was determined beyond doubt that they were outlaws, then it would make little difference which route they took. As it was, however, Rosebud was in favor of going on up the river, Dan up the creek.

Finally they agreed to let the matter rest until morning, and whether the unkncwn party that preceded them were hunters or outlaws—had followed the creek or river—take whichever route had not been traveled.

When morning came and breakfast had been dispatched, Dan and Rosebud began searching the valley for the course of the unknown, and while thus engaged Old Rosebud found a piece of blue ribbon tied to a little twig. Turning, he hurried to camp, exclaiming:

"Boys, I do believe I've struck a clew!"

He handed the ribbon to Sol Warren, who saw written upon it with an indelible pencil these words, which he read aloud:

"Help me! Oh save me! ADRIAN FIELD."

"My God! what does it mean?" cried Scott Vail.

"What it says," answered Old Rosebud; "the gal's in trouble. She's been kidnapped by outlaws, and her father killed perhaps. Boys, there's work for us to do."

"Work in a noble cause," said Vail, then turning to Dare-Devil Dan, who had just

returned, he told him of the finding of the ribbon and the appeal for help from Adrian Field.

"Well," said Dan, "I'm ready to foller them to purgatory, boys, to save the girl. I find they have left the valley and struck north-east across the plains."

"The thunder you say! Then they've gone towards Devil's Lake."

"Hope it's full o' brimstone and they'll fall in," said the boy; "but Rosebud, the country off that way's new to me."

"And to me," said the hunter, "but, boy, we'll make it familiar to us but what we git them gals."

"Yes, and hot to the demons that carried her off," said Sol Warren.

In a short space of time the party were in their saddles following the horse-tracks leading across the prairie toward the north-east; and thus the hunters had become trailers, and a more brave and determined band ever followed a trail.

For two days they followed the tracks of the supposed outlaw abductors of Adrian. They were approaching the desolate and unfrequent region of Devil's Lake. The third day of pursuit had been well spent when Old Rosebud Ben finally observed:

"Boys, this 's gittin' to be monotonous, and if we don't sight our game soon we'll have to go into camp to graze our hosses and hunt some game for our larder."

"I think we'll find the outlaws on Devil's Lake," said Dan. "I've heard them say the lake is surrounded by wooded hills and gullies—jist such a place as a robber likes."

"Ho, my larks!" suddenly exclaimed Old Rosebud who had gained the summit of a little swell in advance of his friends, "thar's a fine herd o' buffalo in the flat jist over this swell, and three miles beyond is the woods o' Devil's Lake."

As he spoke the old hunter dropped from his saddle and came back to his friends out of sight of the buffalo.

"That's good news, Rosy," said Dan, "but are you sure it ar'n't a herd of deer or coyotes? Are you sure it wer'n't dust on your eyebrows you seen?"

"Thunder in the mountains, boy! do I look excited? Doesn't the very expression o' Baalbec's eyes, the poise o' his ears, and the droop o' his tail denote the presence o' buffalo? I should observate they did."

"Then as we're out of meat suppose we make a dash on the herd," said Dan, "and give the boys their first buffalo!"

All readily acquiesced in this suggestion and in a moment every man had settled himself into his saddle, unslung his rifle, and loosened his revolvers.

As the amateurs knew nothing of hunting the buffalo Old Rosebud gave them brief instructions that would enable them to avert danger and at the same time make good use of their chance.

Then when all were ready the signal to advance was given and the hunters dashed over the hill and went flying down into the great flat like the wind.

The buffaloes soon took the alarm and went thundering away toward the northward, but before they were fairly under way the hunters were upon the rear of the herd firing rapidly and with deadly effect upon the shaggy beasts. One by one a wounded buffalo dropped out of the herd and walked away toward the hills or fell dead or dying in its tracks; and still close upon the heels of the herd rode the hunters. Great wanton destruction would doubtless have marked that plain but for the sudden appearance of a horseman on a hill to the west of the plateau.

Old Rosebud was the first to make the discovery. He called a halt as soon as he did. The buffalo sped on and were soon out of sight. The hunters dismounted to rest their panting horses. Scott Vail brought his field-glass to bear upon the unknown horseman that was over a mile away.

"By heaven!" he cried, "that horseman is a woman!"

"A woman! thunder in the mountains!" exclaimed Rosebud.

Scott passed the glass to Dare-Devil Dan who scanned the horseman closely, then said:

"Yes, it's a woman, by gosh, it is! but her face is covered with a black vail—masked."

"Kind o' beats thunder in the mountains," said Old Rosebud querulously; "can't be the woman's Adrian Field, can it?"

"Well, that's what I can't tell," replied Dan, "but propose to know, boys, and, therefore, am going to make a reconnoiter over that way while you folks peel a buffalo or two."

"You look sharp now, boy," cautioned Old Rosebud, as Dan leaped into his saddle, "you know your failin', and there may be a trap set for you baited with a pretty gal."

"Rosy," said Dan, as he gathered up his rein, "when was I ever caught in a trap? when did I ever fail in an undertaking, eh?"

"I don't mean that, Daniel; but you know you allers go a-bilin' with a whoop and hurrah, rip, snort and a bang, and some o' these days you'll run ag'in' a cyclone 'bout your own size."

"I'll take my chances," said the daring youth as he galloped away toward the unknown horsewoman who, as he approached, rode back behind the hill and disappeared from the young ranger's view in a little motte of scrubby cottonwoods.

Dan's friends watched him until he had disappeared also, then they proceeded to skin one of the buffalo. While thus engaged the sharp report of firearms was heard off in the direction the young ranger had gone.

Dropping his knife Old Rosebud started up, fear and excitement written on his bearded face.

"Thunder in the mountains!" he exclaimed, "that young dare-devil's got his foot into it!"

Scarcely had he spoken ere a riderless horse swept into view over a distant hill hotly pursued by half a dozen horsemen.

"By thunder! that are Dan's horse, boys, and those in pursuit are Indians!" exclaimed Rosebud. "To horse, boys, for there are some bloody work to be done now!"

In a few brief moments the young amateurs were in their saddles ready for the worst.

"Come, boys," said Old Rosebud, "let us meet them red devils half-way and massacre them."

So saying the old plainsman dashed away followed by the young sportsmen with drawn revolvers.

Thick and fast were the adventures of that day crowding upon the amateurs; but with all the nerve and dash of veteran rangers they galloped forward to meet the red-skins in battle on the open plain.

Suddenly the horse the savages were chasing turned and came directly toward our friends. Seeing this the latter drew rein and prepared to receive the foe, but the wily red-skins were not to be caught riding into such dangers, and turning their horses' heads they galloped away toward the hills in a manner that seemed to dare the hunters to follow them.

"By the mountain thunders, boys!" exclaimed Old Rosebud, as he watched the retreating foe, "them fellers are not Ingins, but outlaws in disguise. I can tell by the way they ride."

Meanwhile Dare-Devil Dan's horse came up panting with fear and exhaustion.

"My God!" cried Old Rosebud; "there's blood on the saddle—the boy has been killed!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE TOILS OF THE NEMESIS BEGIN TO TIGHTEN.

DEEP and unutterable was the heartfelt sorrow of the brigade of amateurs over the death of Dare Devil Dan. Old Rosebud felt certain there could be no possible hope for the youth who had ridden into the power of a band of ambuscaded outlaws whose trap had doubtless been set for them all.

"Well, what shall we do, Rosebud?" asked Sol Warren—"go at once and avenge our brave friend's death?"

"No, not now, boy. You see we're short on grub," replied Old Rosebud with a sadness in his voice. "Let us finish skinning our buffalo, go over to yonder timber and go into camp, and prepare for defense, for them varmints'll be after us—we need not go after them any furder."

So they returned, and securing the choicest parts of three buffalo, packed the same on their horses, and then headed for the nearest point of timber on the south-western extremity of Devil's Lake. This they reached in due course of time, and to their surprise and joy drew up in front of an old deserted log cabin.

To dismount, unsaddle and unpack their animals and tether them out to grass was but the work of a few minutes.

After this was done they took possession of the cabin, which, judging from the piles of bones lying around, had once been the home of a hunter. The roof had nearly all fallen in, and what remained was speedily cleared away, the rubbish removed from the floor, and the four walls thus left afforded the hunters a snug defense for a short siege.

A fire was now lighted on the ground floor, water was brought in canteens from a spring hard by, and a supper of roasted buffalo-hump and hot coffee prepared and eaten with a keen relish.

Meanwhile Old Rosebud had kept a sharp lookout for the outlaws, but nothing more was seen of them that evening.

As the excitement of the moment died away Sol Warren proposed to make a reconnoissance off in the direction of the lake. Scott Vail volunteered to accompany him, and with their friends' urgent entreaties to be careful, they left the "fort," as they called their defense, and moved away northward.

Slowly and cautiously they picked their way through the deep tangled woods. Half an hour's walk brought them to the lake—a fair-sized sheet of water, with rough, broken and irregular shores densely fringed with trees, willows and vine.

"It's rather a desolate, dismal sheet, Scott," observed Warren.

"Yes, a fit summer resort for his Satanic Majesty," replied young Vail; "but look over yonder, Sol; isn't that smoke rising above them tree-tops?"

"Smoke or fog one," replied Sol; "but it looks more like smoke. We can find out, however, by going 'round that way."

The two moved along the shore in the direction of the object of their curiosity. They had journeyed perhaps a mile when they pressed close to the water's edge and stopped to take observations. The smoke could no longer be seen, but to their utmost surprise they discovered, half concealed under some trees and vines, what appeared to be a long, low cabin. They could see the lower portion of one side under the trees. It stood on the very edge of the lake; in fact, a perch on the lake-side projected out over the water.

"A hidden home, I should say," observed Vail.

"A robber's nest, I should say," replied bluff-spoken Sol Warren. "I'll bet anything on its being the retreat of evil—Hark!"

They bent their heads and listened. The sound of a voice came to their ears; the sound of a voice singing in a low, sweet strain, and what was most surprising, it was a woman's voice.

"By the eternal mystery, Scott," said Sol, "we want to look out! Haven't you heard of the sweet, enchanting voices of sirens, luring men to destruction?"

For several moments the two listened to the sweet singer. Scott Vail's brow became knitted and the muscles of his face twitched nervously. Sol saw that he was deeply, strangely affected by the sweet, soft voice of the unknown singer.

"Sol," the young man finally said, "I'm

not satisfied—I'm going to know more about that singer, siren or no siren."

"Why, what's the matter with you, Scott?"

"Doesn't that voice sound the least bit familiar to you, Warren? or are your ears and heart both deaf and dead to the tender and the beautiful?"

"They may be," replied Sol, with a smile, when he saw that his young friend was in downright earnest.

"To me, it does, Sol, and I would not be surprised should I discover that Adrian Field is in that house."

"Impossible, Scott, surely, impossible," declared Warren.

"My—my feelings tell me not; but wait here, Sol, and I will see who it is, if such a thing is possible," said Scott.

"Boy, you want to be careful or you'll hear some whistling as an accompaniment to that singing—the whistling of a bullet through your anatomy."

But Vail could not be dissuaded from his course, and so he crept softly along toward the cabin. Within twenty paces of the west side of the building, he secreted himself in a clump of bushes. By this time, however, the voice of the singer had become silent, but the youth waited and watched, in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. He waited until he began to grow impatient, for twilight shadows were now gathering in the woods. But for the fear that he would be treading upon perilous and deadly grounds, he would have advanced boldly to the house and satisfied himself, beyond a single doubt, as to who the inmates of the place were.

Finally, however, his patience was in part rewarded by sight of a female figure appearing in the doorway of the cabin, but to his bitter disappointment, the shadows of the overhanging boughs made it impossible for him to distinguish her features. Still strong in his conviction as to who the singer was, he resolved to make his presence known, but before he could carry out this resolution, a piercing shriek smote upon his ears. It came from back along the lake, beyond where he had left Sol Warren. It was a female voice crying for help.

Without even a second thought the young hunter turned and glided back to where he had left Sol, but he found, on reaching there, that his friend was gone. Peering through the bushes around him his eyes finally rested upon a scene that caused the blood to leap wildly in his veins.

Standing near the water's edge—a light canoe rocking on the waves behind her, a steep bank before her—was a young girl the very picture of wondrous beauty. Her wealth of dark hair fell in disordered masses to her slender waist. Her head was bare, and her uplifted face white with terror. On the bank above her suddenly appeared Sol Warren, to whom she lifted her eyes and hands imploringly, while far out upon the lake a canoe with a single occupant was approaching rapidly, as if in pursuit of the girl.

"Oh, help me, stranger! Save me from the power of that man!" she cried in a pleading, piteous tone, as she lifted her gloved hands toward the stalwart youth.

"By the gods, I will!" exclaimed Sol, and dropping upon his knees he reached down, and clasping the maiden's hands, essayed to lift her up the bank. But scarcely had he exerted sufficient strength to lift her from her feet when both her hands slipped from his, leaving the gloves she wore in the hands of Warren. The girl staggered back with a strange, wild laugh, and at the same instant a cry as if of mortal pain burst from the lips of Sol Warren.

"My God! what does that mean?" cried Scott Vail, as he saw his friend fall face downward upon the earth, where he lay writhing as if in a fit of mortal agony.

Vail drew his revolver and was in the act of going to his friend's rescue when a rifle in the woods on his right rang out, and a bullet tore its way across his breast, seeming to leave in

its track a consuming fire. The boy staggered under the shock, but recovering himself, he turned to defend his life. As he did so he saw a lithe figure leap from cover of a tree, where still hung the smoke from the assassin's weapon, and run as if to head him off from camp. To his profound surprise and astonishment he recognized the figure as that of Dare-Devil Dan, the Boy Ranger! In his hand he carried a revolver. His head was bare and he was coatless. He seemed covered with blood. Scott's first impulse was to shout to him, but he refrained from so doing through fear of directing foes to his hiding-place. Moreover, the shot that had been fired at him had come from behind the tree from whence the boy had appeared, and there was not a single doubt in his mind but that Dan had fired it. But why had he done so? Was it through mistake? or was there something deep, dark and mysterious back of it all?

These thoughts were not comforting to the wounded boy, nor had he much time for further reflection. He was growing sick. He felt the blood from his wound trickling down his body. He could no longer see nor hear Sol Warren. He staggered from the thicket and on toward camp. Another shot, fired at some distance, whistled over his head. He sunk to his knees with sheer weakness. He crawled into a cluster of weeds and laid down, and by pressing his hands against his breast attempted to stop the flow of blood. In this he partially succeeded.

Darkness was now coming on, and with the gathering gloom the spirits of the wounded boy began to sink. He believed that it was the shadows of death settling around him.

While lying there he heard two shots fired not far off. He heard the hurried tramp of feet pass and repass him—he even heard the quick, short breathing of the passer.

Blinding darkness finally enveloped wood and lake, attended by a solemn and profound silence. The wounded youth still lay almost helpless in the weeds. A burning thirst finally set in, adding more to his suffering than the pain of his wound; and as he lay thinking of the past, and of the future that seemed to hold out to him great promises, he started, rose to a sitting posture with the firm resolve that he would not die there with burning thirst when so near to water that he could hear the waves breaking gently on the shore. On his hands and knees he crawled from the weeds down to the water's edge and drank until his thirst was slaked. Then he attempted to rise, but his limbs refused to support his body. He sat by the water and bathed his brow. A canoe rocking on the waves hard by arrested his attention. He crawled to where it lay, and finding it was not tied up, came to the conclusion it must have drifted there. At any rate, he resolved to take possession of it, and by a mighty effort he succeeded in getting into the boat. He could find no paddle, and weak and faint he laid down in one end of it, hoping that the wind might carry him to a place of safety. He had not laid there long ere he noticed the wind was changing, but he thought little of what the result might be, for he was now growing so very sick and faint that he became almost indifferent to his fate.

There was neither moon nor stars. The sky was overcast with a gray mist, and the blackness of the Styx hung over the waters of Devil's Lake.

An hour or more had passed when Vail heard the sound of a heavy footstep on the beach. It was approaching—it came nearer and nearer, and finally stopped near the boat. He felt a vibratory shock of the craft as though touched by a hand. This was followed by a crash as if of a lifeless body falling into the opposite end of the canoe—the boat rocked violently, and by this agitation was cast off the beach and went adrift on the waves of the dismal lake.

Scott Vail now felt convinced that he had for a companion a corpse that had been dumped into the boat; but whether it was that of a friend or foe, and why it had been placed

there, he could not tell. He raised his head slightly and glanced at the dark, motionless form at the opposite end of the boat. But it was so dark that he could only distinguish the faintest outlines of the body, and so he settled back, closed his eyes and became resigned to his fate, whatever that might be.

Overcome with weakness and lulled by the gentle rocking of the drifting boat, the wounded hunter finally sunk into a sleep—a sleep filled with wild and horrible dreams—the vagaries of a feverish brain. Once he awoke, and forgetting where he was, he rose to a sitting posture, and gazing around him, endeavored to gather together the broken links of memory. The black waters beneath him, the dark, starless sky overhead, the motionless form at his feet and the rustling of nocturnal wings around, filled his soul with renewed horror and forced the awful conviction upon him that he was afloat upon the river of death.

After awhile he fell asleep again, and those frightful dreams were renewed. He dreamed that he was drifting into the consuming heat of an invisible fire, and writhing in his agony he awoke. A bright blue sky was now revealed to his gaze. It was broad daylight and the fierce heat of a summer sun was beating down into his face with blistering hotness. He tried to move but his body seemed paralyzed. He tried to collect the broken links in his memory.

Suddenly a great dark cloud swept across his line of vision. It was followed by a second—a third—a dozen. Then he heard the rustle of great wings. He felt his burning face fanned by a cool breeze. He felt a vibratory shock of the boat—he heard a strange, low cry. Then again a dark cloud seemed to hover over him—a black wing fanned his face again.

Like a burst of sunshine through a black, storm cloud, the shadows of his mind were dispelled of a sudden, and his memory was regained. Then he started, for a terrible thought entered his mind. He saw those black-winged clouds hovering above him were vultures, and he felt they had been drawn thither by the presence of death—to feast upon the corpse of the unknown at his feet.

By a strong effort Scott turned his head so that he could see the body. The first thing that caught his eyes was the sight of two huge buzzards sitting on the side of the canoe. Their naked, coral necks were outstretched as they peered in apparent doubt into the face of the motionless form.

Without uttering a sound Vail dropped his eyes to the dead. A little cry that frightened the vultures away burst from his lips, for he recognized the dress of the dead as that worn by Dare-Devil Dan! But was that blood-in-crusted face bloating in the sun the face of the Boy Ranger?

Before he could fully determine he heard the dip of a paddle, and a canoe with a single occupant glided alongside the drifting boat.

CHAPTER V.

THE ASS KNOWETH HIS MASTER.

MEANWHILE, Old Rosebud Ben, young Bartlett, Gregg and Eagan impatiently awaited the return of Scott Vail and Sol Warren; and when night finally set in and they came not they grew sorely uneasy. They had heard shots fired off in the direction of the lake and at first thought the boys might be shooting at deer. Finally, Old Rosebud went out and searched for them but without success, and so he returned to camp to await the coming of day.

The promised sport of the young hunters had assumed a character far different from what they had anticipated. Instead of a constant round of exciting pleasure, they were compelled to stand ready to defend their lives at any moment while they waited, with faint hope, the return of three absent comrades.

During that entire night Old Rosebud kept watch over their little defense. He could not intrust that all-important duty to an inex-

perienced guard; but despite his own vigilance, daylight revealed the fact that every horse, even his mule Baalbec, had been stolen! At any rate, they were gone and a careful search of the ground convinced him, beyond a doubt, that a sly old horse thief had been at work.

"By the rollin' thunder in the mountains!" the old hunter exclaimed, "this 'ere's a little too much to stand! It's darned queer what Baalbec war 'bout to let himself be taken away. Many's the time I've gone out of a mornin' and found a dead Ingin or white hoss-thief layin' dead by that mule. Boys, I'll be broke, mashed, tore all up if I have to give up that mule. He's been my best friend, lo these many years. It's a fact, boys, that critter's been 'ith me so long he can set a trap, skin a beaver, skulp a red-skin or fan the fire with his ears; and if I happened to be outer fire all I had to do was to have that sagacious critter kick a rock and out'd roll fire enough to cook a supper for two. No, boys, I couldn't hunt and trap 'thout that mule."

"And w'u'd yees swear to that, Rhosebud?" asked Pat Eagan with an incredulous grin.

"An oath wouldn't make the truth go furder, bog-trotter," said the hunter; "and now if you hair-pegs'll hold this fort here I'll take a mornin' ramble and look for the boys and them hosses. Mind now, you want to keep yer eyes pared and if four thousand Ingins and outlaws swoop down onto you you want to sail into 'em like a herd o' brindle bulls 'ith curls in the forehead and give them thunder in the mountains."

With this advice Old Rosebud shouldered his rifle and took his departure, going in the direction of the lake.

He soon came to the water's edge. He glanced out over the dark and tranquil sheet. All was as lifeless and silent around him as it must have been on creation's morn.

Carefully the hunter searched the shores of the lake. He found innumerable tracks in the sand—where some one had embarked in a canoe—two or three pools of dark blood. He shook his head thoughtfully. A shadow swept over his face. He moved on. The rough and precipitous condition of the ground forced him back from the lake. At length he found himself threading a narrow, winding defile leading northward. An abrupt bend in his course suddenly brought him face to face with his mule Baalbec, and upon the mule sat a rough, bearded outlaw who, holding a carbine leveled full upon the old hunter's breast, thundered out:

"Halt, sir!"

"Of course, sir," said Old Rosebud stopping. Baalbec gave utterance to a brag of recognition that went thundering through woods and over the lake.

"Drop that gun!" commanded the outlaw and his dark eye gleamed murderously along the barrel of his carbine.

Old Rosebud was not slow to perceive the predicament he was in. The outlaw had the drop on him and so he complied with his command, letting his rifle drop backward over his shoulder. However, the old man had faced death too often to thus meekly submit, had it not been that an expedient had been quickly suggested to his mind.

"Wal, what next?" coolly asked the hunter as his rifle fell.

"Throw up your hands, you brazen-faced ole devil, quick or I'll mow you."

"All right, up they go—up Baalbec," replied Rosebud and his long arms swung aloft like dismantled masts.

At the same instant Baalbec gave a snort, tossed his head back, striking the outlaw in the face, then with the agility of a squirrel, reared straight up on his hind feet. So sudden was this done—so violent the blow in the outlaw's face—that the villain slipped from the saddle and fell backward to the ground.

And then, if ever a man made a quick motion, it was that unhorsed outlaw, but quick as he was, he was not quick enough for Old Rosebud, for when he had regained his feet he

found himself looking into the muzzle of Rosy's gun, and caught the deadly gleam of Rosy's eye along the barrel.

"Drap that carbeen!" commanded the hunter, as their eyes met.

Crestfallen, the outlaw dropped the weapon as though it were a red-hot iron.

"Now, throw'p your hands—quick, or by the smilin' Moses I'll wilt you right down!"

Up went the freebooter's hands, while a smile of grim triumph passed over Rosebud's face.

Advancing, the old hunter deliberately unbuckled the outlaw's belt, containing a pair of revolvers and a knife, and strapped it around his own body. He then took possession of his carbine and slung it at his back.

"Now, my gay and festive gambolier," the old fellow said, "you see how uncertain the things o' this world are. While ago you war top canine, now yer under—'way under, with yer ear chawed off, metaphysically speakin'. It war a bad job for you when you set out a cavalcadin' on that 'ere mule. Why, stranger, that's my mule, Baalbec, and he can do anything from fannin' the fire ith his heel to footin' up a colum' of figgers. He's a trained mule, he is. Barnum offered me all Dakota for him. Why, stranger, when you ordered me to throw up my hands you war workin' ferent yourself. That's the sign I alers give 'Bec when I want him to stand up on his hind feet and zibit his manhood. Stranger, mebby you don't know me. I'm Benjamin Burkee—better known as Rosebud Ben from the fact I lived and killed outlaws and Injuns, and hunted and trapped ten years on the Little Rosebud river. That's who I be, stranger, and that's my mule."

The outlaw endeavored to maintain a look of contemptuous indifference, but his features betrayed his fears when the old frontiersman mentioned his name. Finally, as a bird fluttered through the boughs, the villain looked quickly around as if in hopes friends were coming to his assistance.

Rosebud noticed this and said:

"It's only a bird, stranger, but for fear somebody disturbs us and breaks the bonds that bind us together, you'll please mount that mule and foller me."

"And if I refuse?" said the outlaw suddenly.

"I'll shoot!" was the prompt reply.

Without further hesitation the outlaw mounted the mule and as he settled himself into the saddle a faint light of hope lit up his face. Rosebud, however, did not fail to notice it, and he read quite clearly the thoughts in the villain's mind.

"Come on, Baalbec," the old hunter said to the mule, which, obedient to the command, followed along at his master's heels.

A smile was now upon Rosebud's face. A nervous sinister look was upon the face of the outlaw as he looked around him then glanced furtively at his captor.

Suddenly the freebooter whirled the mule, dug his roweled heels into its side resolved upon a bold dash for liberty. But never was a man so thwarted. Instead of bounding forward Baalbec displayed his mulish proclivities by running backward and braying lustily.

Old Rosebud burst into a roar of laughter.

"No, no, stranger, you've made another mistake," he said, "you don't know the stuff mules are made of, do you? I know'd that mule, and you, too, for that matter, or I'd never turned my back on you. So come along, you tricky scamp."

But the outlaw had become so enraged by the failure of his attempt to escape that he resolved, even at the risk of life to make another attempt, and leaping from the mule's back on the opposite side from Rosebud he made a dash for a thicket hard by, slightly crouching so that Baalbec's body would cover him. But Old Rosebud was on the alert and throwing his rifle over Baalbec's back he fired and the outlaw fell on the edge of the thicket.

"He provoked it, he provoked it himself," muttered the hunter with some feeling of re-

gret over the necessity of having to take the life of a fellow-being.

Scarcely, however, had the words fallen from his lips when he heard a "purring" in the bushes behind him, and turning he beheld a huge panther in the very act of leaping upon him.

Too close to use his rifle, the old hunter dropped that weapon and drew his knife, but scarcely was the bright blade out of its sheath ere the body of the beast shot through the air upon the hunter. Throwing up his left arm to protect his face it was seized in the jaws of the panther, but before the white fangs were fastened upon the member, the hunter drove his knife to the haft in the animal's side. Together man and panther fell to the earth at the top of a steep inclination down which they rolled in rapid evolutions.

The hunter's knife had penetrated the panther's heart killing it almost instantly, but so sudden was the death-stroke that it seemed to set the limbs and jaws of the beast in iron rigidness. And so firm was the knife wedged between two of the brute's ribs that Rosebud was unable to withdraw it. But he holding on to the knife and the panther to his arm, the two rolled over and over down the hill and finally shot over an embankment and fell with a crash in a cluster of vines ten feet below.

With the fall the muscles of the dead panther relaxed, and the arm of the hunter was released from those terrible jaws, and as he withdrew his knife from the carcass he rose to his feet, and in a triumphant, yet serio-comic tone, exclaimed aloud:

"Thar, durn yer white liver, pitch into another cyclone, will ye? Buckle on to another thunderbolt, will ye? Didn't know ye war—"

His words were here cut short by a suppressed sound, and turning quickly, he found himself confronted by two forms that seemed more like apparitions than human beings!

CHAPTER VI.

THE RIVAL LOVERS.

SCOTT VAIL started with an exclamation of surprise and joy at sight of the figure in the canoe that came alongside of the one in which he reposed, for it was the figure of a young girl. It was Adrian Field!

"My God! is it thus we meet, Miss Field?" the excited youth cried, half delirious with his emotions.

"Yes, Mr. Vail," she responded in tones of sadness, her pretty face wearing a pallor of fear, "and I am very sorry to find you in such a plight, for you must be suffering. But, Mr. Vail, is he dead?"

She pointed with trembling hand and choking voice to the form of Dare-Devil Dan, whose bloated, blood-incrusted face lay upturned in the scorching sun.

But before Scott could reply the dead moved. The voice of the fair Adrian seemed to have called him back to life, for he rose quickly to a sitting posture, and gazed from Adrian to Scott, and then around him in bewilderment. His face was cut, bruised and bloody. One cheek was so dreadfully swollen that the eye was entirely shut, and his mouth looked as if it was on one side of his face. He was a wretched-looking object, and but for the peculiarity of his garb his friends would never have recognized him.

"Hullo, here!" he exclaimed, in a confused, thick-tongued voice, "what's this mean? where are we? That you Scott? and you, Adrian?"

"Yes, this is what's left of me, Dan," replied Vail.

"Where did you say we were?"

"I didn't say, but we're on Devil's Lake, I suppose."

"Oh, yes, yes; it's all clear to me now, Scott; I remember throwing myself into this canoe, but I've been asleep ever since. How came you in here, Scott? what makes you look so pale? Ah! you're all bloody, boy! Been havin' a waltz with the outlaws too? Did you rescue Adrian?"

Scott answered his questions in as few words as possible.

"Then," continued the boy, still somewhat confused, "we've been floatin' 'round together all night and didn't know it."

"It seems so," replied Scott, "but old boy, I'm rejoiced to see you alive again. We have mourned you as dead, for we recovered your horse and found the saddle covered with blood."

"I'd given myself up as a dead duck once," replied the ranger. "That woman we saw on a horse on the hill-top, yesterday, was simply a decoy—a bait, and I bit and rode right into a trap, and when I attempted to ride out, why—I didn't, that's all. The trap was set for our whole party, but, thank the Lord, I was the only one to git caught. I was bounced by a dozen men, in a little motte of cottonwoods. They seized my horse by the bits, jerked him back on his haunches, and before I could shoot even one o' them, some devil hit me a welt across the cheek and nose, there, that made the claret fairly fly. That's what bled my saddle. Then they threw the noose of a lasso around me, pinioning my arms, and after I'd got a dozen or two chugs of a fist in my face, I was ready to give up. But I watched my chances and about sunset I managed to slip my bonds, picked up my guard's revolver and sickened him, and then if ever you seen a boy with a damaged face run for life and liberty, it war this hair-peg, and—well, here I am. But what surprises me most is to meet you here, Adrian."

"I presume so," the maiden replied, "but, my friends, I do not feel at liberty to explain the cause of my presence here on Devil's Lake at this time. In fact, I am really in ignorance of the cause myself, strange though it may seem to you."

"You are stopping at the cabin on the lake shore, are you not?" Scott Vail asked.

"Yes, sir, and it was by permission that I came out onto the lake for a boat-ride. I saw your drifting boat, and some strange curiosity brought me to it. But, my friends, you would not be safe here a moment were it known at the cabin you were here. I pray you will leave the lake at once."

"Thank you, kind girl," replied Scott, gratefully, "but of whom are we in danger?"

"Your enemies," was her evasive reply.

"But where shall we go?"

"Ashore, to your friends," she answered, as she took up her paddle, evidently to depart.

"But, Adrian," said Vail, eagerly looking into the girl's face, "when shall we meet again?"

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Vail," she answered, her voice betraying some emotion. "I wish you both a safe return to your friends and a speedy recovery; good morning," and dipping her paddle she was gone.

"Valley of Jossaphat!" exclaimed Dare-Devil Dan, "there's somethin' thunderin' queer—strange, 'bout Devil's Lake."

"I should say so, Dan," replied his comrade; "here we were led into the country to rescue that girl, and by her own appeal, too, and here we meet her a free spirit, coming and going at her pleasure, and hasn't one word to offer as to why she made that appeal, and now doesn't seem to be in need of help, but on the contrary, is able to help us with advice."

"Scott, let's go ashore, dress up our wounds and then I'll tell you what I think 'bout it—in fact, what I know 'bout it."

So acting upon this suggestion the two youths paddled ashore with their bands,

landed, concealed the boat and then washed the blood from their faces and hands. They then retired to the shadows of an overhanging bank where Dan examined Vail's wounds. It was found that a bullet had plowed an ugly gash across the fleshy part of his breast making a painful though not dangerous wound. It had bled profusely and the boy was weak from loss of blood, but the bleeding had now ceased and with strips of his shirt Dan bound up the wound in good shape.

Dan's own wounds, with the exception of a

few bruises on his arms and body, were all on the left side of his face and over his right eye.

After their wounds had been dressed, Dan said:

"I want to tell you now what happened when the outlaws took me in yesterday. That woman that I saw made her appearance among the outlaws as soon as I was disarmed. Her face was covered with a green veil. At sight of me she uttered a low, triumphant laugh, and said, shaking her gloved hand in my very face, 'Dare-Devil Dan—murderer! your race has been run, and you may prepare your soul for the flames of hell. You deserve it. You murdered my father—you and Rosebud Ben, and my father's friends—you, and those five young hunters!' 'Who are you?' I asked, and she replied: 'I am the daughter of Fenn Wier whom you murdered! and you will find that his spirit lives in me—lives for revenge; and a dozen brave and fearless men have sworn to aid me in my work of vengeance. You will be my first victim. Even now the toils are closing around your followers. Ha! ha! ha! she laughed, oh so tigerish, 'that appeal on the ribbon you found at the forks was the work of your Nemesis. You were decoyed here on a fool's errand to be destroyed. Vengeance is mine and I will repay.'"

"Well, she must have been a demoness," said Scott, "but after all is it not a little mysterious? The singular disappearance of Adrian Field, or her whereabouts, have been solved by coming here. At any rate, she is here a free spirit, it seems."

"Ah! that's what puzzles me, Scott, and sometimes I think it were possible that I was not the only disguised passenger on that ill-fated coach."

"What do you mean?"

"I have half suspected that Adrian Field was the daughter of Fenn Wier instead of Thomas Field—that Adrian Field is our Nemesis."

"Heavens, Dan! that can't be!"

"I hate to think so, but I got it in my head that the voice of that vailed tigress resembled Adrian's, although she spoke in tones of great passion."

"Dan it can't be," persisted Scott; "one so pleasant, lovely and so womanly could not be such a devil at heart."

"That's what I've been thinkin'—what I hope is true, but Scott, what are we to think of Adrian's disappearance from Fort Rice? that ribbon appeal for help that brought us into this fiend-infested country to her rescue? and lastly, her presence here this morning a free agent maintaining perfect silence and almost indifference to all?"

"I must confess it seems strange, very strange, but my respect and admiration for that fair girl makes strong my faith in her honor, and I firmly believe that time will prove the correctness of my conviction."

"Scott Vail," and there was a change in Dan's voice, "isn't your faith in Adrian Field grounded in something stronger than faith and respect?"

Scott's pale face colored slightly, and fixing a firm, resolute look upon his interlocutor, he replied:

"Yes, Dan, I am free to confess that from the night Adrian Field came to our camp on Grand River, I have loved her."

Dan bit his lip and for a moment was silent; then he said:

"But, Scott, I have a prior claim on Adrian Field, for the reason that I had met her at Deadwood several days before you could ever have known or dreamed of such a person."

"Then you wish me to understand that you, too, love Adrian?"

"I am not ashamed of it, Scott, although, if my surmises should prove correct, she will make me repent of it—you, too, my boy."

"Then we are rivals, Dan."

"It seems so."

The boys both spoke in soberness; for they were in earnest. There was a few moments' silence. Both seemed to forget their condition

as well as their dangers. They were absorbed with thoughts that seemed to embody all that there was in the happiness of a future life. Finally Scott said:

"Of course it need not make us enemies, Dan."

"If so, we might just as well settle it now and here," replied the young ranger, picking up Vail's two revolvers that lay upon the ground at his side and handing one to Scott, retaining the other.

Involuntarily the young amateur took the weapon, and just as he did so the crack of a rifle rung out over the lake.

"Music!" cried Dan, as if the startling report had fired the blood in his veins.

Both rose to their feet and listened. They heard a strange noise on the hillside above them. Every moment it seemed to grow more distinct—come nearer.

"What is it, Dan?" asked Scott.

Before Dan could answer, two forms locked in each other's embrace, shot from the bank overhead, and came crashing to the ground before them!

A glance told them that one was Old Rosebud Ben, the other, the form of a huge panther.

CHAPTER VI.

DOOMED TO DEATH.

"MOUNTAIN thunder and jagged lightnin'!" burst from Old Rosebud as he turned and confronted the two apparitions before him. Is that you, Scott Vail?"

"What's left of me, Ben."

"And that critter—what's that?" pointing to Dan.

"Why, don't you know me, old pard?" asked Dare-Devil Dan, with a grin that made his deformed face look absolutely hideous.

"Heavens and earth! it's Dare-Devil Danyil! Why, boy, what's the matter with yer face? Have you been buttin' with a cyclone, boy? been in the clutches o' a painter? Darn my ruggin' if ye arn't the wust ruined article I ever clapped these ole eyes onto. You're uglier nor a Digger Ingin—a Chinese wart hog. Ho! ho! ho! Danyil, I could make a fortune 'zibbitin' you as a mammoth pollywog from Devil's Lake. But then I'm glad to squiz yer hot palm, boy, if your mug is all scowled outen shape. But say, whar's Sol Warren? whar you both been? what ye been doin'? Tell me the hull story, boys."

Scott Vail, in as few words as possible, narrated his and Sol's adventures. As to Sol's fate he knew nothing.

Then Dan recounted his adventures, his capture and escape, his meeting with Scott and Adrian on the lake.

"Thunder in the mountains!" exclaimed Old Rosebud, after the boys had concluded their stories, "thar's a mystery 'bout this lake, and that leetle gal's into it, too. I've hearn o' she-devils bein' disguised in the looks and smiles o' an angel, and our Adrian may be one o'—"

"Hold on, Rosebud," interrupted Scott Vail. "I don't believe any such a thing."

"Hullo! treadin' on sacred ground, am I?"

"Well, I can tell you there is more than one woman in this vicinity. I know the maiden to whose rescue brave Sol Warren hurried, when she stood crying for help, was not Adrian Field."

"Well, time'll surely tell. If we don't all git took in, we'll know more 'bout this business 'round here afore we leave. But the fust thing we do now'd better be to go back to camp and hold a conflagration. You fellers must be hungry as goats. Scott looks as though every drap o' blood war pumped outen him. But that face o' yours, Dan—oh, but she's a roarin' sweet mess."

With this Old Rosebud led the way up the hill, Dan assisting Scott. They soon came to where the hunter's rifle lay along with the outlaw's carbine. Old Baalbec was grazing near. The dead outlaw lay where he had fallen. Old Rosebud walked out and examined his pockets. He came back with a torn envelope in his hand, bearing the address, "Marshall Field, Fort Rice, Dakota."

There was a letter inside of it, which Scott took out and read. It ran as follows:

"MARYSVILLE, Mo., May 10, 18—

"DEAR BROTHER:

"Yours of recent date just received. In reply, I would say that I start for Dakota next month with my daughter Adrian. Since writing you before I have buried my dear wife, and now I am anxious to

leave here. I have disposed of my property, and I think will be able to buy out your partner in the cattle business. Since there is another young lady at your ranch, Adrian thinks she will like living there. I will write you again when to meet us at Fort Rice. Your affectionate brother,

"THOMAS FIELD."

"Oh, ho!" exclaimed Old Rosebud when Scott had finished reading. "I begin to scent a mice, boys. I'm sorry to say it, but that dead critter must be Marshall Field, the uncle of Adrian. And that fellow has been representin' to his brother Thomas, an honest, upright man, that he war in the cattle-business out here, and has duped Thomas into joinin' him."

"That's it, exactly," said Scott.

"And he came on and finds his brother an outlaw," added Dan.

"Yes, and I don't wonder now that Adrian talked so strange to us, Dan. The poor girl is mortified to death, almost. But, by heavens! she shall not stay here, if she desires to leave!"

Here the conversation ended and the three hurried to camp, Scott riding Baalbec.

Their return was hailed with shouts of joy by those in waiting.

After Dan and Scott had been served with some nice broiled buffalo-meat and a cup of strong coffee, Sol Warren's rescue, if alive, became the subject of their conversation. It was finally settled with the understanding that Dare-Devil Dan make a reconnaissance in the vicinity of the cabin and ascertain, if possible, whether Sol was alive, and if so, where he was confined. Nothing definite could be done really until this information was gained; and if it was found that Sol had been killed then no further dangers need be incurred in that direction.

Dan was impatient for night to come. The thoughts of seeing Adrian again had much to do with his chafing spirit.

At length, however, the sun went down and as soon as it was dark he bid his friends good-by and left the camp. He made his way through the woods, striking the lake some forty rods south of the outlaw retreat. Here he sat down and listened and watched. A number of times he caught sight of a flashing light in the building, and heard a door open and shut frequently.

That something—perhaps something unusual, too—was going on he had not a doubt; but how was he to ascertain what it was? The place he knew was securely guarded, and to attempt to get within earshot of the cabin by land might result in getting a bullet through his body. But not to be defeated, the boy quickly made up his mind to approach by water—by swimming.

So laying aside all his weapons, except his hunting-knife, he divested himself of his outer garments and silently entered the water.

Dan was almost as much in his element in the water as upon land, and he swam silently yet rapidly along within the shadows of the shore toward the cabin. A gentle breeze was blowing so that if he made even the slightest noise it was drowned in the plash of the waves against the bank.

The stars were shining, yet an unusual darkness fell over the lake. It was some time yet till the moon came up.

The swimmer soon arrived in the immediate vicinity of the cabin. He remembered that Scott Vail had told him that the porch on the east side of the building extended out to and, to all appearances, over the water's edge; and he swam on until he was within a rod of the building when he stopped to listen and get his bearings. Hearing nothing, however, but the wash of the wavelets he glided on and finally found himself directly under the platform or porch. Here he rested with his feet on the bottom of the lake although the water was shoulder deep.

The boy could now hear footsteps on the cabin floor, and from these sounds he discovered that a wide channel extended on under the main building.

Taking advantage of this discovery, Dan waded on until he stood directly under the cabin. Threads of light shone through the cracks in the floor relieving the place of some of its gloom, enabling the young ranger to make further investigations of the place, which investigations resulted in his finding four canoes tied up under the cabin.

Dan felt highly elated over his discoveries. He saw how well the outlaws were prepared for escape by water should an attack be made upon them from in front, for they doubtless possessed the only canoes on Devil's Lake, and had nothing to fear from the east or lake side.

The object, however, that had taken the ranger there had not yet been accomplished. He listened intently. He could hear a number of

voices, but he could not catch the drift of their conversation, nor could he hear distinct enough to tell the number of persons present by the different voices. But in the course of half an hour he heard a sharp, rap, rap, rap, as if of a cane upon a stand or table. Every voice was at once hushed, and a deep and profound silence reigned, but only for a moment, when a clear, talsetto voice rung out, saying:

"Let him be taken to the Isle of Secrets and be shot!"

This imperative command was followed by another momentary silence, which in turn was succeeded by the tramp of many feet and a confusion of voices.

"Valley of Jossaphat!" the Boy Ranger mentally exclaimed, "who is it that's to be shot? I do wonder if it's poor Sol Warren? If it is there'll be somebody else shot on the Island of Secrets. Laws of mighty! if I had the boys here now we'd strike them scoundrels like a double-geared hurricane. But see here, Daniel Brady, if them fellers go to the Isle of Secrets they'll not be likely to walk, or swim—no, they'll go in these canoes right here, and—"

His musings were suddenly cut short by a trap-door in the middle of the floor being suddenly thrown open, letting a flood of light down upon the water.

Fortunately it did not reach Dan who, from his concealment, was enabled to see up into the cabin. He saw not less than a dozen rough, bearded and armed men, and among them he saw a young woman—a strange, beautiful, dark-eyed girl who seemed to be directing the movements of the men. That this girl was his and his friends' Nemesis, he had not a doubt, and while he stood, undecided as to whether he should run the risk of staying there longer or depart at once, he saw a tall, coatless, hatless and bootless form pushed to the edge of the trap-door.

It was the form of Sol Warren, who, with his hands tied at his back and his ankles fettered, stood erect, the same bold, brave and handsome young giant upon whose face there was a look of contemptuous defiance.

The sight of his friend soon decided Dan's course. He would await further movements, and if there was any earthly opportunity to aid his friend he would improve it at the risk of his own life.

Presently an outlaw came, and kneeling by the opening, thrust the muzzle of a rifle down into a canoe and swung the craft around directly under the opening. Then he dropped himself down into it, and laying his rifle in the end of the craft, shouted out:

"All ready."

Then Sol Warren was lifted bodily from the floor by two men and lowered feet foremost into the boat.

Scarcely had the prisoner taken his seat when the boat, by some unseen power, swung around so as to bring the doomed youth into the darkness. At the same moment the cold blade of a knife was slipped between his fettered hands, and he felt the cutting bonds part and fall from his wrists. Then a hand tapped him lightly, yet nervously, on the arm.

Hope rose in the breast of the young amateur. He was sure a friend was at his side in the darkness.

By this time another outlaw had dropped himself to the floor, and sat with his legs hanging through the opening ready to drop into the boat as soon as his friend could swing it back into position.

"I'd like to know what ails this boat!" growled the outlaw, placing his hands against the floor and endeavoring to swing it back; "the infernal thing seems inclined to gee off—Oh, God! Help! I'm killed! mur—!"

The last word died on the man's lips, and he fell over dead. Swift and deadly had been the blow of Dare Devil Dan's keen blade, and as his victim dropped overboard into the water, the young ranger pushed the boat out from under the light—out into the open water; then he leaped into the craft, saying as he did so:

"Quick, Sol, grab the paddle and make her smoke!"

"Ay! it's you, Dan!" exclaimed Sol.

At this juncture the rising moon cleared the distant tree-tops and flooded the lake with a bright, mellow light.

The crash of half a dozen guns and the whistling of bullets around them told the fugitives that they were discovered.

Then two canoes with two occupants each shot out from under the cabin in pursuit.

"They're after us, Sol, they're after us! Pull, my gallant comrade—make her sides smoke—Laws of mighty! we're in for it now, for it's sure death to be taken, Sol!"

The last words were occasioned by the paddle in Sol's strong hands snapping in two like a pipe-stem.

Their canoe came to a stand.

"Sol, can you swim?" asked Dan.

"I'm a good swimmer, Dan," he replied.

"Then we must swim for life."

The two rose and leaped overboard into the water. The outlaws uttered a shout of triumph that rung in startling echoes across the lake.

Their friends on the shore answered them back.

Then as if with very shame the moon hid her face behind a tattered cloud.

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE IN THE MIDST OF DANGER.

As they leaped overboard into the water, the fugitives became separated and each struck out for himself. The pursuers' canoes were not over fifty yards away when they took to the water, and were coming with lightning rapidity.

Dare-Devil Dan plunged under the waves, and, with the daring characteristic of the fearless youth, he turned and swam directly toward the outlaws. The thought he had conceived in a moment, had but one chance in a hundred of success. He swam swiftly along under the waves until he was forced for want of breath to rise to the surface. As he did so the moon was just unvailing her face.

It had been Dan's intention to swim beneath the pursuers' boats and come to the surface in their wake as they would not, he knew, be looking for him behind them. In this he was successful beyond his most sanguine hopes. He rose fully thirty yards in the rear of the enemy, and lying upon his back he caught his breath, then struck out—not for the shore, but directly back toward the outlaws' stronghold.

The outlaws on shore were running along the bank keeping abreast of the canoes, with their eyes fixed on the water around the deserted boat. This fact enabled the Boy Ranger to regain with safety his position under the cabin floor. But his exertions had well-nigh exhausted him, and he gladly improved the opportunity offered for a few moments' rest, taking care, however, to crowd himself back into a dark corner of the place.

The trap-door was still open and the light was shining in the room above flooding a large portion of the water beneath.

Perhaps five minutes had elapsed when Dan heard a light footstep on the floor above. He leaned forward and peered up into the room. As he did so his heart gave a great bound, for he saw Adrian Field. She was walking the floor and wringing her hands as though in bitter anguish of heart.

The boy could not resist the temptation to speak to her, and moving forward until he stood in the light, he called her name in a subdued tone.

Adrian turned and gazed around her as if in doubt.

"Here—under the floor," continued the boy, "it's me, Adrian, Dare-Devil Dan."

"Oh, Dan!" cried the girl, "leave quick! they'll kill you—they will soon be back!"

"All right, Adrian," he calmly replied, "blow out the light and I'll go up through the house."

Adrian quickly removed the light into an adjoining room, then Dan swung himself up through the opening into the very heart of the outlaw stronghold. As he moved across the floor toward the open door a hand touched him softly on the arm, and a voice asked in a whisper:

"Dan, do you know whether Sol escaped?" It was Adrian who asked the question.

"I don't, Adrian, but I half believe he has or your folks would be back before this; but Adrian, I want to speak with you."

"Then we must seek a safer place," said the maiden.

Together they passed out of the cabin and walked back into the shadows a few paces from the door. Then Dan asked:

"Adrian, arn't you out of place here?"

"Yes, Dan, I am," she replied.

"Are you a prisoner?"

"No; I came here with my father, not knowing the true character of these people. Uncle Marshall Field represented to father that he was in the cattle business, and prevailed on him to come out to Dakota and purchase an interest in his ranch. Not until you were captured the other day did father begin to suspect that the 'cowboys' were outlaws. Not a hoof does the band own unless it is horses. But uncle Marshall gets around his deception, or tries to,

by telling father that they sold their entire herd which was driven to the Niobrara. Poor uncle Marshall! he has paid for his deception."

"What do you mean, Adrian?" asked Dan, though he well knew.

"He was found dead in the woods to-day, killed, we suppose, by some of your friends. He started in the direction of your camp on Old Rosebud's mule to make a reconnaissance of your position."

"Say the word, little gal, and you shall be taken away from here. I'm ready to die for you, Adrian," declared Dan.

"Oh, Dan, you are a brave, noble boy, and I could not ask for a more gallant and manly escort than you, but I cannot leave yet."

"And why not, pray?"

"I cannot go without my dear father."

"Can't you coax him to spike the enemy's guns and slip over to our camp?"

"I do not know, Dan; Cordelia Wier, the daughter of the outlaw chief whom you and your friends killed, is now leader of the band. She is a bloodthirsty, revengeful and merciless being, who would not hesitate to slay me and my father did she but know even our feelings. And yet in her calm moments she is a beautiful, lovely and intelligent girl, with a soft, gentle voice; but when her spirit becomes fired with thoughts of her father's death she seems transformed into a demoness. She has taken an oath to slay you and every one of your party."

"She's makin' a blasted little fool of herself, and poor headway in her revenge business," said Dan; "but they came within an ace of cookin' Sol's goose for him, I'll testify to that."

"She declares she'll torture you and Rosebud at the stake."

"I'll haunt her if she does, shure as she's a woman," said Dan, with a suppressed chuckle. "Oh, I do wish I could send one of the boys over to make love to her, win her heart and capture her that way."

"She has seen every face in your party and stamped them on her memory. She was in your camp in disguise on your second night out from Fort Rice."

"I'll bet she wouldn't recognize mine now," said Dan, "for Rosy says it's the ugliest face on the globe outside of the gorilla districts in Africa. My left eye has been off duty even since last night, and my cheek looks like a war on a gum-tree."

"But your voice would expose you, Dan."

"Well, I don't want to take many risks, I'm sure; but, say, do you know what your folks done with our horses?"

"Yes, they are all over on what they call Willow Island along with the band's horses. I heard them say there was good pasture there and a fine place to conceal animals. They claim to possess the only canoes on the lake so they have no fears of any one getting over there. There is a dug out there, also, where they store such booty as they do not want for immediate use. They have arms, ammunition and clothing there. They also keep a supply of Indian disguises there for frequently they make raids disguised as savages. This I learned from Cordelia who told me all while in one of her confidential moods."

"D'y'e know how they get the horses over to the island?"

"They start in from a point of land just west of the island. The water is shallow enough for wading half the distance; then they swim a short distance when they again touch bottom and wade to the island. But now, Dan, I trust this secret to your honor. It would cost me my life and perhaps my father's should it be known that I had revealed it to you."

"God bless you, girl, the fires of purgatory could not burn the secret of the source of my information out of me. But, Adrian, how does your father like his situation?"

"He is bitterly disappointed and has not made up his mind what he shall do yet. But to keep down suspicion and foul play he has to keep up an appearance of being satisfied and co-operate with them. Since the death of uncle Marshall he has been most wretched. The outlaw had expected an easy victory after they succeeded in decoying you into this country; and right here let me say, that I never knew until to-day how that was effected—that my name was signed to a note appealing for help. But you must be on the alert if you remain in this vicinity, for a messenger was sent yesterday to the Indian village for a score of bloody warriors to assist in your destruction. They say Cordelia has a wonderful influence with the chief, Little Bear, who is in love with her."

"We'll be on the look-out, Adrian, rest assured, and on behalf of myself and friends,"

thank you for this information. I know you would not try to deceive me, Adrian, for I have an undying faith in you—yea, Adrian, I even love you with all my heart and have since the day we left Deadwood."

"Oh, Dan!" exclaimed the girl with tremulous emotion, "I am unworthy of the love of so brave a boy."

"You're worthy of any fellow's love, Adrian, and if we both ever get safely out of our troubles here I hope to see the day when you will—"

"Hark, Dan! the men are returning! Oh! do flee!—flee for my sake!"

"Good-by, Adrian," and taking her hand he pressed it to his lips, then glided away into the woods.

The young ranger hurried back to where he had left his cap, coat, moccasins and fire-arms and securing them he hurried on toward camp.

On his arrival there he found his friends in arms ready for a conflict, for skulking forms had been seen around in the woods.

Bitter was his disappointment when he learned that Sol Warren had not come in, and he made up his mind that the young hunter had either been killed or recaptured, which were substantially the same.

Dan recon'ed his adventures and the information he had gained though he was silent as to the source of the latter.

"Boys!" cried Scott Vail whose spirit was strong though the body was weak, "when I leave this country it will be when I know Adrian Field is dead or has preceded me to the land of civilization."

"Shake, ole pard, on that," said Dan who admired the resolute courage of his rival.

"Second the motion!" put in Old Rosebud. "Ha! ha! ha! I see that every galoot of you kids are in love with that gal, but if anything'll make a feller fight like a Trojan for a gal it's love. However, I'm goin' ter cut every one o' you sprouts out o' Adrian when the time comes. But layin' love matters aside, I've this to offer, that if Sol Warren gits around alive, we git over to that Willer Island and rekiver your hosses if possible, then make a dash for that gal, and her father if he wants to git out o' his bargain, and pull for the Cheyenne river. But don't forget, boys, that we've poked up a hornet nest and will do awful well if we git out o' this no wusser than we now are."

"I'm agreed to all you say, Rosy," said Dan, "cept I'm going to Willow Island this blessed night and get them hosses. My blood's up, and while I've got my hand in I want to work. This is a lucky night for me."

"Boy, maybe that islan' is guarded."

"It'll be all the worse for the guard, Rosy, for if I get over there them hosses comes, or I'll go under."

"Wal, if you say so, boy, it ginerally turns out to be so."

In a short time Dan took his departure.

The night passed very quietly to the little band of hunters.

Just as day began to dawn in the east the indomitable Dare-Devil Dan returned with his and his friends' horses. He was riding his own horse and leading one. To the tail of the latter the third was tied and thus was each of the others secured by tying it to the tail of the one preceding it. Nor were the horses all he brought in. On the backs of three of the horses were huge bundles done up in blankets. He had found them in the dug-out, spoken of by Adrian; and he had helped himself to such things as he thought might be of use to them.

"Have any trouble, Dan, on the island?" asked Rosebud.

"Not a bit; the guard never had time to yell after I got in reach of him, and then I was boss of the situation, and waded in and helped myself. Valley of Jossaphat! how I did wish the boys were all there! But say, Rosy, I struck a place round here that beats Gibraltar for a defense."

"What kind of a place is it?"

Dan described it.

"Good place," declared Old Rosebud, and the idea of a change of position being favorable to all, the little party packed up their effects, saddled their horses and departed.

By a circuitous route they got in north of the outlaws' cabin, and about two miles from there they came to a halt and went into camp.

The place was the one selected by Dan. It was a narrow tongue of land, half a mile in length, putting out into the lake. It was barren of timber, except a small grove near the center. In this the hunters began the erection of a defense. Having an ax in their outfit,

trees were felled, and the boys laid them up into walls.

The horses were tethered out to grass on the point next to the lake.

Two guards were kept on the lookout for danger, for Rosebud felt sure that the wrath of the robbers would know no bounds when they discovered that Willow Island had been raided and the guard there slain.

Nothing yet had been seen or heard of Sol Warren, and his friends had given up all hope of ever seeing him alive again.

Somewhat fatigued with his night's work and exposure, Dare-Devil Dan was persuaded to lie down and take a nap, that he might be ready for the work of the coming night, which all felt would be an active one.

The day wore slowly away. It was in the afternoon. Pat Eagan was walking by the lake shore. A strong wind was blowing inland. White-capped waves broke upon the beach with a loud splash. The sun shone hot. A few birds were darting here and there over the lake with wild, impish cries, and while Pat stood watching one of these, an exclamation suddenly burst from his lips.

"What's the matter down there, Ireland?" asked Old Rosebud.

"Swate mother ave Moses, and it's a dead body mees see dhriftin' this way, Rhosy!"

Followed by Dare-Devil Dan, who was now ready for work again, and two of the amateurs, the old hunter hurried down to Eagan's side.

"And d'ye see it, Rhosy, out there?" asked the excited youth, pointing out into the lake.

"I see it," declared Dan; "it is a dead body floating shoreward with the billows."

"Some dead outlaw, I reckon," observed Old Rosebud.

"Boys," said Dan, with a husky voice, walking close to the water's edge and gazing steadily at the corpse with his single eye, "that is no outlaw's body, but our friend Sol Warren's."

A groan escaped the lips of the party.

"Poor Sol!" said young Bartlett, "it will kill his old mother."

"He's drowned," added Dan; "but better that than to have died at the hands of the outlaws."

The body floated to within a few feet of the beach, and came to a stop. It lay upon the back. The eyes were partially open, and the face half hidden by green, aquatic moss.

"A sad, sad ending of the life of big-hearted, whole souled Sol Warren," sighed Scott Vail.

Old Rosebud waded into the water to bring the body ashore. He was bending over it when he saw the facial muscles move, the eyes opened and then a laugh burst from the lips of the supposed dead.

Old Rosebud started back as if from a serpent as Sol sprung to his feet, naked to the waist, and dashed the moss from his face.

"Thunder in the mountains!" burst from the old hunter's lips. "You infurnal big scoundrel!—you Lazarus!—you heathen!—you pestiferous fraud! I've a notion to drap you right there—have a funeral anyhow! Here, give me your paw, you villain! Thank the Lord, boy, you're alive!"

Sol Warren was fairly embraced by his young friends, and for several moments everybody seemed wild with joy. Even the guards forgot themselves and left their posts of duty to shake hands with their beloved big friend.

"Then the outlaws didn't get you, Sol," said Dan, after the excitement of the moment had ended.

"Not a bit of it, Dan, but I had to swim half a mile to that island you see there, before I could rest a foot on the ground," replied Sol.

"Well, you're a good one, you are, boy. An alligator could not play dead on a nigger baby, better'n you did that. Why, you can swim like a dead fish; must 'a' been raised in a frog-pond, weren't you? But, say, tell us your experience since you left us, Solomon."

Sol sat down, for he was tired, and narrated his adventures, from the time of his capture to his landing there. The appeal for help from the girl by the lake shore, proved to be simply a most cunning decoy. The girl was Cordelia Wier, herself, and the gloves on her hands were connected with the poles of a powerful galvanic battery, secreted under the banks, and the moment she withdrew her hands the electric current was established and Sol Warren rendered helpless. It was a devilish expedient that had been conceived by the brain of the desperate girl to wreak a terrible revenge on the authors of her father's death.

"Why, the dod-gasted witch she must be!" declared Old Rosebud; "the Ole Nick, hisself, wouldn't 'a' thought of sich a thing. But then,

Sol, I must say you're a brindle bull, with a curl in the forehead, on adventure. If you'd associate with me and Baalbec awhile you'd be—"

"A jackass," put in Dare-Devil Dan.

"Say, boy, ar'n't that mug o' yours mashed up bad enough? Do you want that other cheek o' yours bunched? Do you want old Baalbec to fan you with her off heel? You can be 'commo-dated if you do," and the old hunter joined in the laugh that followed.

The party now rose and went to camp. Sol was provided with a suit of clothes, and while dressing himself, Old Rosebud prepared him some food and a cup of hot coffee, of which he partook with a keen relish.

Then all sat down for a quiet chat, feeling extremely happy in the fact that every one of their little party was safe once more; although Frank Bartlett was still suffering from the effects of the wound received in the fight on Grand River; Scott Vail was quite weak, though plucky as ever, and Dare-Devil Dan's face was still holding its own in swelling and variegated colors.

While they sat enumerating their casualties and facetiously recounting the adventures attending their grand buffalo-hunt, one of the guards suddenly shouted out:

"Ho, boys!"

"Well, what now?" asked Old Rosebud, rising to his feet.

"I saw an Indian or something dart into the woods up along the lake shore, off hereaways," answered the guard.

"Scalps, by Jossaphat!" exclaimed Dan, and snatching up his rifle he darted across the opening and entered the main woods as though the very word "Indian" had fired his breast with a thirst for savage blood.

"Darn that boy," growled Old Rosebud, "he's actin' the pork 'bout this business—don't give me a chance to put in a shot anywhares. I'll have to set down on him."

The announcement of the presence of Indians, however, carried with it the conviction that all would soon have their share of fighting, and so guns and revolvers were got in readiness for the work that might be expected at any moment.

Dare-Devil Dan had been gone nearly an hour when he was seen to emerge from the woods, driving before him at the muzzle of a revolver, an Indian warrior.

Old Rosebud advanced to meet him, demanding:

"What you got thar, boy?"

"Sharp-Shoot, the great and glorious winged-beel Indian runner to the court of the mighty, Little Bear," was the boy's response. "I foolish him most gloriously—made him believe I was a scout of the great white chief, Fenn Wier, and got his message from him—the verbal message of Little Bear, to the white queen, Cordelia Wier—and then I took him in. Oh, but he's a mad Ingin."

"You're a sweet, dear boy, you are, to tell a poor lone Ingin a falsehood and a discontortionation," said Old Rosebud. "Have you ever heard the story of that great liar, Ananias? Hev you never sot under the drippin's o' a missionary's sanctuary, you bloodthirsty young heathen? Why didn't you be more sanctificatory and—shoot the pizen varmint?"

"'Cause I didn't want to spoil his clothes," replied Dan.

"Didn't, eh? Well, what's the fleet-footed runner got to say 'bout things that concerns our welfare?"

"He says the outlaw messenger arrived at Little Bear's village with a broken leg—pony fell with him—and as he was unable to return, the chief dispatched Sharp-Shoot with the message to hold the fort, for he'd be along with a band o' warriors and help his white friends jerk the scalps off Dare-Devil Dan and his villainous companions, and paint blazes in general on the sky. Sharp-Shoot's a half-breed and can talk good English, but he's green—green as grass, or he'd never been taken in by—"

"Another greenhorn," observed Old Rosebud, with a chuckle.

"Well, Rosy," continued Dan, "at any rate, he says he was never at the outlaws' cabin, and that he knows none of them, nor they him. In view of this fact, don't you think his clothes would about fit me?"

"S'posen they did, don't you look ornery and lousy enough without any more trimmin's?" asked Rosebud.

"Old thick-head, can't you take a hint? Don't you know what I mean?" demanded Dan.

"Well, I s'pose I do, but boy, you can't waltz 'round this lake with impunity every day and right. You're goin' to git your foot into #

bad, fust thing you know. It looks to me that trouble has been comin' to us fast enough 'ithout goin' after it."

"But, Rosebud," said Dan, "I want some fun, and fun I'm goin' to have. It's not often I git out on such a holiday excursion and I want to improve the time; and I'll tell you what I propose doing."

Seating himself he told his friends the plans he had in view for the coming night; but his friends objected on the ground of the dangers to be incurred. However, Dan was obstinate and determined, and could not be persuaded to forego the daring exploit he had conceived in the capture of the runner Sharp-Shoot.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OUTLAW CONFERENCE.

We will now leave the camp of the would-be buffalo-hunters, and conduct the reader to the home of the outlaws—the head-quarters for the past four years of the notorious road-agent and cattle-thief, Fenn Wier, whom we have seen laid low in death by the marksmanship of Dare-Devil Dan, and whose daughter assumed his fallen mantle in the leadership of the band—not to rob and plunder, but avenge his death.

The cabin was fully forty feet long and was built of logs and poles and covered with a thatched roof. It was divided into several rooms, the outlaw's daughter having a suit of small rooms fitted up for herself in perfect elegance and taste. Then there was one main room and the others were used as sleeping apartments.

It is on the night following the events narrated in the previous chapter that we would enter the main, or sitting-room of the Retreat as the outlaws called the place. Ten men and two women are assembled therein. The latter are Cordelia, the beautiful outlaw girl, and Adrian Field.

Since the escape of Sol Warren the outlaws have been lying idle and inactive. They have realized that in Dare-Devil Dan and his friends they have met a foe worthy of their steel—yea, with whom they have been unable to cope. In every movement made against them they have lost a man, and so far as they know not one of their foes has been slain. They feel the loss of their old captain, Fenn Wier. He was not only an organizer but a leader of men. They had so long been accustomed to follow where he led, and look to him for instructions, that they now found themselves almost helpless. They had the spirit and the will but not the executive ability to carry out any desperate undertaking. Moreover, there are whispers of mutiny in their ranks. Thomas Field, the new convert, has expressed some dissatisfaction since the death of his brother with the way matters are carried on. But as the band has met in conference let us listen.

"This whole affair," says one Bill Chesney, "has been miserably conducted—disastrously to us. If Cap Wier was here alive, every man and boy of them hunters would be planted on the Isle of Secrets before to-morrow night. Now, just look at the matter and see how ridiculous it is: Dare-Devil Dan and his six friends were on their way to the buffalo-range and would never have come within two hundred miles of here if we hadn't decoyed them here with that appeal of Miss Adrian's, and for what? Revenge. But now, have we got it? Four of our men are dead, and not a hunter that we know of has ceased to breathe. That's the way matters stand to date."

"Yes, exactly!" thundered "Redtop Dave," "but the trouble with us's been that we've bit off more'n we could chaw, and if we'd a' killed that infernal Dare-Devil Dan and that t'other big lummix when we had 'em under our thumb, instead o' waitin' and foolin' around 'bout this thing and that, we'd have two less to contend with, and especially that young bell-weather, Dare-Devil Dan. I'll bet you if they git a-holt o' me they'll wait for no cer'mony, but put a streak o' daylight bang thro' me!"

"I don't believe that big fellow, Sol Warren, is alive," said Chesney; "at least, I didn't see him with the others when I made a reconnoissance of their camp to-day. I believe he was drowned last night."

"Hope so," said "Pony Jack," a little brutal-looking Englishman.

"Gentlemen," said Thomas Field, though the word almost stuck in his throat, "we have got to do one thing or the other—"

"What's that—surrender or flee to the mountains?" interrupted a fellow, with a sneer.

"No!" replied Field, with a look that resented the insult, and either to go bravely to work

and drive them hunters away or leave ourselves. The way we have been doing, if continued, will result in the death of all."

"We've got to wait till the Ingins come," said Chesney, "for forty men couldn't whip them hunters entrenched as they are on the peninsula with supplies from our store-house. The trouble with you, Mr. Field, is that you've not been in the West long enough to get your bearings and distances."

Chesney's last words were full of sarcasm, which cut deeper into Adrian's breast than her father's.

"I have been here long enough to see my misguided brother laid in his grave," the insulted man replied.

"Well, if Little Bear with a score of warriors comes to our assistance," said Chesney, "you will see about seven hunters laid in their graves. It will not do for our safety here to let one of them escape, for that would be just as bad as for them all to get away and give the military the secret of our location."

"But suppose Little Bear doesn't come to our help?"

"Then we'll have to watch the foe and take them on the wing."

"Yes, yes," said Redtop, "you'll take a nest of hornets on the wing like we've been takin' them."

"Men!" cried Cordelia, her face white with emotion, her voice fierce with passion, "I hope there will be more amity and unity of feeling among you in this work, and that you'll make up your minds to daily no longer with them fellows, Indians or no Indians. We still outnumber them, and I know they are no braver nor better fighters than the men who have followed my father for years!"

This speech was received with a ringing shout of applause and restored harmony of feeling.

"She's a chip outen the old block," declared Chesney, "and doesn't care for man or devil."

At this juncture the door was opened and one of the two men who had been stationed outside as guards appeared on the threshold, saying:

"Boys, good news! a message from the Indian village."

"Hooray!" shouted Redtop.

"A message only?" cried the impatient Cordelia.

"Better'n nothin'," put in Pony Jack, as a lithe form clad in Indian raiment was ushered into the room.

"This is the chap," said the guard; "his name is Sharp-Shoot."

"How do?" said the Indian, whom all saw was a half-breed.

"Judas Iscariot and Pocabontas!" exclaimed the lippy Redtop, "he's the ugliest animal I ever saw hop on two feet."

"Don't insult the messenger with your mouthings, Redtop," said Chesney in an undertone.

But Redtop's assertion was true. Sharp-Shoot had but one eye, the other being overshadowed by a deformed and misshapen cheek and brow.

The Indian stopped near the door and glanced furtively around the room and then at the outlaws.

Cordelia invited him to be seated, but he declined to sit down.

He was dressed for speed in a close fitting suit of buckskin and a calico shirt. Moccasins were upon his feet. His head was bare. A single gray feather was in his scalp-lock. In his belt was a tomahawk and scalping-knife.

When his eyes fell upon Cordelia he took from the bosom of his shirt a tiny turtle shell, handsomely engraved in Indian characters and highly polished, and, handing it to the girl, said:

"Sharp-Shoot bring this to white squaw—Little Bear sent it, and says he's her friend."

"Bully for Little Bear!" piped Redtop.

"I accept it with many thanks, tell your chief," said Cordelia, though she felt more like crushing it under her foot; "but what tidings do you bring, Sharp-Shoot?"

The Indian looked at her silently, as though he did not understand her question.

"Go for him ag'in," said Redtop.

"What word do you bring me from Little Bear?" she repeated.

"Little Bear come to-morrow fast as can. White messenger got leg broke here," and he laid his hand on his thigh, "couldn't come back—Little Bear send Sharp-Shoot to tell he friends he come quick to-morrow."

"Good! good!" shouted the robbers.

"Sharp-Shoot, are you hungry?" asked Cordelia.

The Indian nodded his head.

Adrian Field, by request of Cordelia, brought

him some cold meat and biscuit, which he devoured with a keen relish.

While he was eating the outlaws discussed the situation in a more hopeful light.

"Good!" said the Indian, as he swallowed the last bite and licked his lips like a dog.

The outlaws could not repress a smile. Cordelia laughed outright. Only Adrian Field was unmoved.

Finally the loquacious Redtop asked:

"Sharp-Shoot, why are you called Sharp Shoot?"

The Indian grinned, but it was a hideous, wolfish grin.

"'Cause me shoot straight," he finally answered, with an air of self-importance. Then, whipping a pistol out of his shirt-bosom, he pointed it at the light and said: "See!" The pistol cracked and the light was put out and all were in total darkness.

The outlaws applauded the exhibition of the Indian's marksmanship. Sharp-Shoot had proven his right to his name, and notwithstanding his deformity of face, he made a favorable impression on the outlaws.

The light was relit. The Indian turned as if to leave. Cordelia advanced and said:

"Will you not remain here with us till Little Bear comes?"

The Indian shook his head, saying:

"No—must go quick—git back before Little Bear starts."

"Then for God's sake, men, give him a horse to ride!" exclaimed Cordelia.

"No—me go quicker on foot," said the runner; "go straight—ride horse have to go way round—crooked like river—like snake crawls—Sharp-Shoot run fast like the deer—Little Bear soon come."

"Then may the Lord speed you, Sharp-Shoot, good-night," said Cordelia.

The Indian walked slowly out of the cabin, and moved softly away along the lake shore toward the north.

When beyond the beat of the sentinel he stopped. He heard a soft footstep and saw the faintest outlines of a cloaked form emerge from some bushes and approach him. He laid his hand upon his tomahawk.

"Dan?" called a low voice.

The Indian bent his head and listened.

"Dan, is that you?" the voice repeated.

"Yes, Adrian, it is," the Indian replied, for as the reader must have surmised the Indian was Dare-Devil Dan.

The maiden approached the daring boy, saying in a whisper:

"Oh, Dan! what a terrible risk you have run! I recognized you the moment you entered, and I finally had to leave the room to keep my actions from betraying you."

"You're a noble girl, Adrian," replied the Boy Ranger; "but you see I wanted to get the lay of the land in that outlaw cabin and also the plans of the villains so's we could be ready to meet them. The genuine Sharp-Shoot is a prisoner in our camp. I pumped his secrets out of him by playing off outlaw, and this is what, along with his raiment, enabled me to pass myself off so well. I knowed my swelled face would help me out, for no one but you in that cabin had seen me to know me since the swelling had set in."

"Oh, Dan! this is all desperate work! But tell me, have you heard anything of Sol Warren yet?" Adrian asked.

"I have, for a jolly fact. He's safe and sound as a hound's tooth in our camp."

"Oh, I am so glad to hear it! Sol was such a noble fellow; but Dan, father is growing very despondent, and we are going to leave here just as soon as an opportunity offers."

"Come, go with me now, Adrian."

"Oh, no, no," she replied; "I cannot think of leaving father for I am sure the outlaws are watching him, and should I leave they might mistrust his intentions and kill him. I thank you for your kindness, but I cannot go with you now."

"Well, I'm sorry you can't, Adrian, but tell your father to be on the lookout, for we may soon make an opening for you and him to escape."

"I hope so, before the Indians come," said Adrian.

"As to their coming, girl, I stretched the truth to your folks," the boy said: "for, from what the true Sharp-Shoot says, they may be here yet to night."

"I sincerely hope not," replied the maiden.

"So do I; but, Adrian, you'd better be going in. The outlaws may mistrust all is not right, if they should discover your absence, so, good-night."

Before he could finish the word a lithe figure sprung from the bushes upon him, and seizing him by the throat bore him to the earth.

Filled with sudden terror, Adrian uttered a wild, piercing shriek, and turning she fled toward the cabin.

The guards heard her cry and hurried in the direction whence it emanated.

In silence Dare-Devil Dan and his unknown foe struggled upon the earth. But the contest was of short duration, for just as an outlaw guard came upon the spot, one of the combatants rose to his feet and glided away into the darkness, while the other lay prone upon the earth.

A low, gurgling sound called the outlaw's attention to the outstretched form, and advancing he stooped and laid his hand upon it. He spoke, but received no answer. He ran his hand along the body. The breast of the unknown was naked, and from the left side the hot life-blood was spurting.

At this juncture another outlaw came up.

"Joe, a murder's been done, but by whom, I do not know, unless by one of them demons on the peninsula; nor do I know who the murdered party is. Did you hear that scream?—sounded like a woman's scream."

"Yes, that's what drew me here," replied the other; "mebby that murdered being is a woman."

Lifting the now lifeless form, the outlaws carried it and laid it in front of the cabin on the grass. Then one of them went into the building and told his friends what had occurred.

"Lord John Rodgers!" exclaimed Redtop, "I wonder if some o' them sleuth-hounds from the peninsula has been layin' 'round and murdered Sharp-Shoot?"

Chesney took up the light, and followed by his friends, went out to examine the dead man. Adrian, with a white, pallid face, went too, his heart almost ceasing to beat with fear, dreading to look upon the face of the dead, lest she look upon the face of Dare-Devil Dan.

"A stranger, and an Injin at that!" exclaimed Chesney, holding the light so that its rays fell upon the motionless form.

Adrian could scarcely suppress a cry of joy, and turning, she hurried back into the cabin.

"Here's more mystery, boys," continued the outlaw, "a dead Injin in our door-yard calls for some expla'ation. I see the feller has got two knife-thrusts in the side. But who did the work? and whar'd the red-skin come from?"

"Bet the bug-juice, Dare-Devil Dan done that," said Redtop, but he found no takers, for all were completely dumfounded by the mysterious tragedy.

CHAPTER IX.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE outlaws could arrive at nothing definite regarding the mysterious death of the unknown red-skin. The guard could give no further information than that he heard a scream, ran to where it emanated, and saw a shadowy form disappear in the darkness, and then heard the Indian's death-rattle.

Finally they came to Redtop's conclusion that Dare-Devil Dan had done the deed, and so the body was covered with a blanket and the outlaws went back into the house.

An hour now was spent in putting guns and revolvers in order and in loading them.

About midnight the guard was relieved, then the light was put out, and all retired to rest.

The hours passed in silence, but just in the break o' day a guard came and rapped sharply on the door.

Chesney quickly rose and answered the summons.

"Hooray, comrades!" shouted the guard, lustily, "a number of the Indians have arrived! Up, comrades, and welcome them warmly!"

In a few moments every outlaw was out of bed.

The guard conducted the red skins into the house.

It was scarcely light enough yet to see one's countenance, but a few minutes more and it would be broad daylight.

The Indians were welcomed by Cordelia, who was disappointed in not finding her savage admirer, Little Bear, among them. Big Thunder was the chief of the little squad. He was a tall, powerful savage, gaudily bedecked in paint and feathers. He spoke English fluently, and seemed bold and impudent in the liberties he took in the cabin.

Adrian Field was the last of the household to enter the room where the savages were. Big

Thunder was talking when she entered, and at sight of him she started back as if with involuntary fear. The chief appeared to notice her emotions and turned away.

"Where is Little Bear, Big Thunder?" Cordelia finally asked.

"Comin'," was the chief's reply.

"Will they be here soon?"

"Mebby—when the sun comes up."

"Thank heaven! that will not be long," replied Cordelia, then turning to Adrian, she continued: "Adrian, I presume we will have to prepare breakfast for these fellows. It will please them—Why, Adrian! what ails you? You are all in a tremble."

"Oh, the sight of those bloody Indians terrifies me!" Adrian replied, in a low tone.

Cordelia laughed a cold, cruel laugh, and with a sneering remark at her childish timidity, turned and left the room.

By this time it had grown quite light in the room; still, one could not clearly see the features of the others.

The Indians still maintained a standing position with their blankets hanging loosely around their shoulders.

There were ten outlaws in the room and six Indians, but all of a sudden a seventh savage glided into the room, banged the door behind him and fastened it by shooting a heavy bolt fixed across it into a mortise in the jamb made to receive it.

"Sharp-Shoot, the messenger, 's back! Hooray!" shouted Redtop, "but what's the feller mean by shootin' and boltin' that door?"

"Sharp-Shoot, your gizzard," responded the supposed runner in his natural voice. "I'm Dare-Devil Dan, and the fust man that attempts to draw a weapon is a dead duck!"

As he spoke, the young dare-devil leveled a pair of revolvers on the startled outlaws, and at the same instant the blankets fell from the shoulders of the other six Indians and twelve more revolvers were brought to bear upon the deceived, outwitted freebooters.

"Avaunt!" cried Old Rosebud; "gentlemen, you're our meat, and don't forget it. I know such deception is mean, but it's a case of life and death. You know me too well to attempt to monkey with a cyclone. You may jist as well s'render gracefully, for we've the drap on you, if you did entice us here that you might avenge the death of Fenn Wier!"

"Boys," said Chesney, with a look of hopeless despair, "we've been betrayed, and Thomas Field, you did it!"

"It's a lie, you villain," was Field's indignant retort, as he turned upon the outlaw with a face white with rage.

"What does this mean?" cried Cordelia, entering the room like an imperious queen.

"It means that we're ahead, my pretty Nemesis," replied Old Rosebud, "and there'll be some shootin' pretty quick if you disturb matters here."

"That man Field's betrayed us," repeated Chesney.

"I'll gamble on it," chirped in the irrepressible Redtop.

"No!" cried Cordelia, fiercely. "I hold that wretch and murderer, Dare-Devil Dan, accountable for all!"

"I won't quarrel with a gal," said Dan, "therefore you can 'sass' me all you want to, but your men folks darn't do it, or I'll let go these pups of war. This catawampus face and cocked eye of mine are the work of your minions, and I feel like havin' satisfaction. You little thought, when you were mauling me over the head and in the face the other day, that you were putting a disguise on me that was to bring you to grief. What we want is not unreasonable—simply you fellers to surrender gracefully as we don't want to kill you in the presence of these female gals; but gals or no gals, if you offer to raise a hand we'll slaughter every mother's son of you. You baited us into this country with a woman's appeal, and we're going to take her away from here whether she wants to go or not."

Perhaps the disguised hunters would not have been so slow in finishing up their work had they not discovered that they held every advantage. Not an outlaw had a weapon about him. Their side arms hung on the walls of the cabin, and their guns stood in the remotest corner of the room. They knew that one movement toward these would be the signal for the foe to fire, for men, brave enough to enter their—the robbers'—stronghold, would not hesitate to shoot, they knew full well. Moreover, both doors leading from the room were guarded, and so there was no chance of escape by either of these.

For a moment Cordelia regarded the situa-

tion with a look of hopeless despair; then, as her woman's quick wits seemed to suggest some plan of relief, she started toward the door, saying, in a commanding voice:

"Stand aside, and let me pass out!"

"I can't do it, Miss Nemesis," said Dan, "until your folks here are made prisoners."

"They have offered no resistance," she replied, "what more do you ask of them?—to lay their heads on the block?"

"Want them to throw up their hands, and that at once, for this is getting monotonous. Throw up, gentlemen, and then understand that the first one that lowers a finger until commanded will be shot dead!"

The outlaws glanced at each other. A look of utter hopelessness was upon each face. There was no alternative for them than to obey the command of Dare-Devil Dan, and so all but one raised his hands. This one was Thomas Field. Dan fixed a sharp look upon him. Their eyes met, and the boy was satisfied.

"Sol Warner," said Dan, "will you search these fellows?"

Sol lowered his revolvers, placed one of them in his belt, and then searched the outlaws and found two derringers and several murderous-looking knives.

"Now, friend Vail," said Dan, "will you take down them revolvers on the wall and them guns in the corner, and chuck them under the floor into the water?"

Scott raised the trap-door and dropped the revolvers into the water beneath. He had just started for the first rifle when a wild, demoniac yell rose on the morning air outside of the cabin.

A wild, triumphant cry burst from Cordelia's lips, and a light of hope flashed in the eyes of the outlaws.

Our friends started with a look of sudden surprise, and their faces became set with an expression that spoke plainer than words, for full well they knew the meaning of that terrible yell.

It was an Indian war-whoop. Little Bear had at last, and in fact, arrived with fifty warriors at his back.

Turning to the hunters, Cordelia hissed out: "Vengeance is mine!"

CHAPTER X.

LIVELY TIMES IN THE OUTLAW CABIN.

DARE-DEVIL DAN and his friends were in a precarious situation. They knew that the outlaws on guard outside had acquainted the savages with the state of affairs, and that nothing but the most desperate measures could save them from death.

The outlaws inside were emboldened by the changes in the situation and that which came over the spirits of their daring enemies. And taking advantage of this, Chesney dropped his hands, saying:

"Now, curse you, we will dictate conditions to you!"

But scarcely had the last word left his lips when a revolver cracked and the villain fell dead.

Instantly a savage yell rose outside and the blows of tomahawks were rained upon the door.

As Chesney went down a cry burst from the lips of his companions and with an oath of vindictive rage they bounded across the room and seized the rifles in the corner and raised them.

"Fire, boys!" yelled Old Rosebud, and half a dozen revolvers rang out sharp and stinging.

Two outlaws fell dead and two were wounded. The others, driven to desperation, pressed the triggers of their rifles, but the hammers fell with a "click," and there was no report.

"Fire and furies! the guns have been tampered with!" cried Pony Jack, shrinking back, his face wearing the pallor of death.

"Don't fire! don't fire!" cried Redtop, throwing down his gun and raising his hands, "I'll surrender—mercy! mercy!"

Dropping their guns the now terrified outlaws huddled into the corner, like frightened sheep, with hands upraised before their faces and white lips begging for mercy.

The hunters did not fire again. They had no desire to take the lives of the outlaws, vile and wretched as they were, unless absolutely necessary for their own salvation.

Dare-Devil Dan still maintained his position at the door to keep the bolt that held it in place, for this opening and the trap-door in the floor were the only places that would admit of an entrance to the building.

Seeing her friends were powerless Cordelia sprung to a little ten-by-twelve inch window

and endeavored to acquaint those outside with the situation within; but this was the opportune moment for Thomas Field to prove that he was no outlaw at heart and he did not fail to see and improve it, and springing across the room he seized the desperate girl and dragged her away from the window.

"Traitor!" she hissed, turning upon him, her eyes burning with an unearthly glare; "oh that I had a dagger to pierce your treacherous heart!"

"Whew!" exclaimed Old Rosebud; "Lord, don't she scotch?"

"Cordelia," said Field, in a calm, quiet mood, "I regret this state of affairs; but you cannot say I did not warn you."

"A snap for you and your warning, Tom Field!" the girl replied; "but remember you have shown your hand before the game has begun, for you are not safe yet!"

"Not by a darned sight," piped out the voice of Redtop from the corner behind his companions.

"Well," said Dan, "there's one thing about it; if we're to die here we'll all go together—friend and foe, man and maiden."

As there was danger of forcing an entrance through the roof of the house, a watch was kept moving through the building to guard against such danger.

As long as the door, which was made of heavy, seasoned timber and opened outward, could withstand the blows of the enemy's hatchets the hunters felt no particular fear. They knew that so long as those outside were kept in ignorance of the true state of affairs inside, the savages would be slow to adopt extreme and violent measures to dislodge them through fear of injuring their friends.

Presently all became quiet inside and out of the cabin. Half an hour had thus passed when the little window heretofore mentioned was darkened by a savage face peering into the room. But if the daring wretch discovered how matters stood there, he never lived to tell it, for a bullet from Old Rosebud's revolver crashed through his brain, and he sunk down lifeless in his tracks.

This defeat was followed by another fiendish yell outside, and a vigorous attack was made on the door and walls of the cabin with hatchets again. But the cunning wretches took good care to hack no holes in the building that might serve the enemy inside the purpose of port-holes, and after a few minutes of wild demonstrations they took their dead warrior and retired back into the woods.

A consultation was now held by the hunters, Thomas Field taking part with them. They could not arrive at any other conclusion than that they were in a fearful dilemma. Although they were victors in one sense of the word, they were virtually prisoners in another. And how were they to escape? Of course they could not take their prisoners with them, even though an avenue was open to them; and yet to leave them there alive would simply be to augment their future peril. Their very souls revolted at the idea of the wanton destruction of human life, while to think for a moment now of making terms with their own prisoners and the savages was entirely out of the question.

Should nothing decisive be accomplished before night, then the hunters could act with some degree of certainty, but they hardly dare hope for such a thing.

Every gun and pistol—in fact, weapon of any kind—except their own was gathered up and dumped into the water under the cabin. Then the outlaws were compelled to step out into the middle of the floor and submit to being bound hand and foot by Sol Warren.

Cordelia was treated with as much kindness as her violent passion and revengeful spirit would permit. She threatened once to fire the house over their heads, and would no doubt have done so had Old Rosebud, in a tone of convincing firmness, not threatened to bind her hand and foot. After this she became somewhat quiet, but it was the quiet of the caged tigress in whose furtive glances can be seen the pent-up ferocity.

By this time the sun was an hour high, and beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, Old Rosebud made inquiries of Adrian Field as to the condition of the outlaws' larder, and on learning that there was an abundance of cold meats and bread, Adrian and her father were invited to serve the same to the party.

To the surprise of all, Cordelia offered to assist, but the very look that accompanied the offer seemed to suggest "poison" to Old Rosebud, and her services were declined.

After a hearty breakfast had been dispatched

Rosebud took a careful survey of the situation. The Indians were still back in the woods. Not a soul could be seen within pistol-shot of the cabin.

As the hours went by Cordelia gradually became reconciled to her situation. The inactivity of the Indians had given rise to the fear that they had entirely withdrawn from her assistance; and so, it would require all her woman's tact clothed in her best demeanor to circumvent and outwit the men in whose power she was a prisoner.

The silence of the outlaws and Indians outside did not cause the vigilance of the hunters to relax for a moment, for they suspected their silence was only a ruse to draw them out.

Noon came and the sun began his westward descent, and although that day had dragged along like a weary age, the besieged at last saw the shadows of night gathering around them, and their courage and hope grew stronger.

That night would decide their fate one way or another, and as they had little to hope for in a long siege, they made up their minds that if an attempt to escape from the cabin must be made at all, the sooner the better. And the canoes known to be concealed under the floor of the main room were the only means that offered a possible show of success; and even this might be thwarted by the wily foe anticipating such a movement. In fact it might be the very cause of their silence, but be that as it may, the party resolved to make the attempt.

Dare-Devil Dan, Old Rosebud and Scott Vail planned their course in a room out of hearing of the outlaws. Then Dan took the others aside, one at a time, and gave them a full detail of their arrangements which met with a hearty approval.

The first thing to be done, however, was to blindfold every outlaw for it became necessary to use a dark lantern at times and they wished the freebooters to be kept in ignorance of their movements if possible. They were, also, gagged that in case they discovered the truth they could not make it known to their friends outside. The outlaws made no resistance, for, in view of the fact that one of the hunters was in favor of silencing them by shooting them, and came near carrying his point, they were only too glad to escape with the blindfold and gag.

Cordelia, however, knew that she would not be harmed and so fought and struggled desperately, but she was finally silenced and then informed that she was to be taken away with them. A shawl was thrown around her shoulders, then Sol, who had lowered himself into a canoe under the floor lifted her down and placed her on the thwart at his side.

Four canoes were under the house. In three of the largest nine persons, including Thomas Field and his daughter, embarked. The fourth canoe was left for Dare Devil Dan who was to remain with the outlaws until assured the boats were beyond danger. This step was thought extremely necessary for two reasons: first, should the outlaws be left alone they could soon effect each other's release by placing their hands close together so as to finger their bonds, and give the alarm before the boats were out of danger; and then again, should all leave at once, and then be forced to retreat to the cabin again, it might be to find the outlaws free and ready to receive them with the door opened and the red-skins at their back.

When all was ready Sol gave the word to move and then the three boats crept from the shadows of the building—out into the star-lit waters silently as phantoms.

Voices could be heard about the building, and the fugitives held their breath in dreadful suspense, expecting each moment to hear a warning voice or the crash of firearms announcing their discovery.

It was one of those most trying moments when the duration of every heart-throb seemed like an hour. Never did boats move so slowly. They seemed weighted with lead. To all it was a trying ordeal, but to Thomas Field and his daughter it was torturing, and a cry of joy involuntarily burst from their lips when Old Rosebud, with whom they were seated, finally said:

"Friends, the Lord's with us—we're safe!"

With this announcement all dared to look back. The outlaw cabin was blended with the darkness of the wooded shore.

A little further on Old Rosebud permitted his canoe to come to a stand. The others came alongside and stopped. Here they waited the coming of Dare-Devil Dan, for whose safety they had entertained no fears up to this time.

The fugitives conversed in low tones, and something of the old-time spirit of the amateurs

and Old Rosebud began to crop out in their remarks.

Cordelia was given her liberty, and like a sensible woman she kept quiet after she had given free expression to her indignant feelings by declaring her friends a set of stupid, cowardly fools, and Little Bear an ignorant beast in permitting them—the hunters—to escape as they had from under their very eyes.

Ten minutes, perhaps, had passed in waiting, when a cry suddenly burst from Old Rosebud's lips as a long beam of light shot out from the west shore across the water.

"My great mercy! the cabin's been fired! Boys, we didn't escape a moment 'too soon' he said.

All turned their eyes and saw that the hunter spoke the truth.

Cordelia, with a white, distressed face, looked steadily, silently at her burning home for several moments, then buried her face in her hands and wept. The iron spirit of the beautiful woman had at last yielded, and the tigress had been transformed into a sobbing, weeping girl.

The whole southern end of the building was now in flames. Brightly shone the light over the water, lighting up the faces of the fugitives with a weird glare.

But where was Dare-Devil Dan? Nowhere upon the bright expanse of water between them and the fire could they see their young friend, and a sudden fear took possession of their minds.

"Thunder in the mountains! what if somethin' has happened the lad?" exclaimed Old Rosebud.

"It will be awful—absolutely awful," replied Sol Warren.

"I don't see the savages' object in firing the cabin," said Scott Vail, "unless to destroy their foes they concluded to sacrifice their friends."

"Boy," replied the old hunter, "my only wonder is that it hasn't been fired before this. Had I been the leader o' the forces outside and wanted to rout the foe inside, even though friends were there, I'd a' fired the building and thereby forced the foe to throw open the doors which we'd a' done afore we'd have roasted, and thereby released the others. I reckon they got the idea through their brains and applied the torch, which is perfectly satisfactory evidence that our escape by water was never dreamed of even by the white villains outside who knew of the passage under the house. But look! both ends o' the buildin' are burnin' now! Zounds, how the flames take hold of the dry thatch! but, say, isn't there a form movin' to and fro on the roof?" and the old man shaded his eyes, and, leaning forward, gazed steadily at the burning building.

"Yes," replied Sol Warren, "there is a form on the roof!"

"Merciful heavens, boys! it is Dare-Devil Dan! He's s'rounded by fire! Hear them savage fiends a yellin'—boys, I can't set here and see that noble boy roasted alive! I will die first—here, Sol, you and Phil jump in here with me, and Mr. Field, you and Adrian take their place in that boat, and we will hasten ashore and do what we can to save the lad, though there are little hopes for him!"

The change was quickly made then Old Rosebud dipped his paddle and as his boat moved out from between the others he said:

"Folks, you pull for the island due east of here and if we don't lose our hair we'll join you there afore midnight."

"May God speed you, Rosebud," said Thomas Field as the boats parted.

By a circuitous route that carried them out into the darkness beyond the light of the burning cabin, Rosebud and his companions soon reached the shore. Landing they concealed their canoe, then turned and hurried in the direction of the outlaws' home that was now one broad sheet of roaring flame.

CHAPTER XL

THE OUTLAWS' CABIN IN ASHES.

AFTER his friends had left him alone with the seven blindfolded and gagged outlaws, Dare-Devil Dan felt a sensation of loneliness he had never experienced before. While watching every movement of the outlaws, he almost trembled with suspense for the safety of his friends, and when he thought that should it be discovered that he alone remained in the cabin, he grew restless and uneasy.

Scarcely twenty minutes had elapsed—insufficient time he feared for his friends to have got beyond danger—when he suddenly discovered that the south end of the building had

been fired. His own surprise at this discovery, however, was not so great as that of the outlaws who fairly groaned in their terror while their forms shook like reeds in the wind.

Satisfied now that his friends must have escaped, Dan made up his mind that he must go at once or never. So he stooped to the trap-door. It would not yield. He tried again and again, and to his horror discovered it had been fastened underneath. He started up and looked around him. The flames were eating through the wall and roaring like a tempest. He started toward the door. A yell warned him back. Turning to the outlaws he said:

"Fellows, your blood will be upon the heads of your friends if you perish here."

He turned and entered an adjoining room.

The outlaws heard his retreating footsteps, and thus left alone, as they knew they were, having detected the escape of the others, they soon effected their release, and shooting back the bolt that had so stubbornly held the door, they rushed out into the open air.

A yell greeted their appearance, and in a moment they were surrounded by a group of savages and their friends who had been on the outside.

"It was a last resort, boys—where's the rest of our friends?—and our foes?" asked one of the outlaws.

"All escaped an hour ago, but Dare-Devil Dan; and they took Cordelia, and Field and his girl with them in our canoes. Why in wonder didn't you watch the water?" It was Redtop who thus addressed his friends.

"My heavens!" cried one of the others, "I swam under there myself and fastened down the trap-door—I didn't notice any canoes being gone—it was so dark I could see nothing."

"You ought to be roasted in that fire, Duke," said Redtop, "for criminal stupidity; but, boys and warriors, the arch-devil of all earthly fiends, Dare-Devil Dan, is in that building. Watch the water and see that he is roasted alive—if he comes out seize him and hurl him back into the flames!"

Meanwhile Dare-Devil Dan was on the lookout for some chance for his life. He soon discovered that the north end of the cabin was also on fire, and began to realize that he was in the most imminent peril—surrounded by fire, savages and water. But he determined to make one desperate effort for life. He had faced death before, but not in so many forms at once.

Jumping upon a table he climbed into the loft. With his knife he cut a hole through the straw roof on the side sloping toward the lake, and looked out. A wall of flame was on the three sides of him—the north and south ends and the west side of the building. The trees that stood close against the house threw their great boughs out over the roof. Their green foliage drooping downward brushed the roof on either side.

Dan sprung out upon the roof expecting to be riddled with bullets, but he soon discovered that there was no one on the watch on the lake-side of the house, and that the high ridge of the roof and the foliage of the trees concealed him from view of those on the opposite side. But what could he do there? He looked down into the lake, but the leap would be fatal. He lifted his eyes and looked at the low drooping boughs of the trees that almost touched the comb of the house. He saw the leaves withering and curling in the heat, but the thought suggested to his mind was his last resort for life. The chance appeared to him but one in a thousand. He dropped his rifle and revolvers, climbed up to the ridge of the roof and leaped into a bough that swayed under his weight.

Still the youth was unperceived, for a wall of fire and smoke was between him and the foe, yet he must pass through that wall before he was safe even from the flames. He crawled along the limb to the very edge of the fire, but the heat and smoke were too much for him, and he stopped and looked back. To his horror he saw the roof behind him ablaze. Again he raised his eyes as if appealing to heaven. Another limb was within his reach overhead. He quickly swung himself upon it. From this he climbed to a third and then a fourth with the agility of a squirrel. But he could now go no higher, and closing his mouth and holding his breath, he began crawling along the limb directly over the flames that almost licked, with their fiery tongues, the bough he was on. But the wonderful boy, the hero of many a wild and perilous adventure on land and on water, was equal to the emergency, and half-blinded and almost suffocated with heat and the stifling smoke, he finally reached the tree-trunk fully thirty feet from the ground.

Dropping himself astride the limb and clasping his arms about the tree to keep from falling, he drew a breath of fresher air. Then he leaned his head against the tree and closed his eyes for he began to feel dizzy and sick.

Although the foliage between him and the fire was thick and green he could feel the heat. A steam was rising from the blistering leaves permeating the air with a sickish odor.

The heat of the fire had driven the Indians and outlaws back beyond the tree he was in, but he would have been in no danger of discovery there had they been directly under him for the dense foliage, the drifting smoke and steam completely enveloped the upper part of the tree.

After the youth had got his lungs somewhat cleared of smoke and his brain had ceased to whirl, he looked around him to see what his chances were for the next movement. He looked behind him just in time to see the roof of the cabin go down and a billion of sparks go floating upward into the inky blackness of the sky.

From this time on the light began to gradually die out. Finally the walls fell, then the light flared up again and lasted until the logs had crumbled to coals when only a red glow relieved the surrounding darkness.

Thus for fully three hours, Dare-Devil Dan maintained his silent perch in the shelter of that friendly tree; nor was the end yet. The foe made no motion toward leaving the place. On the contrary they gathered around the red, glowing ruins and fairly blistered their faces looking into the fire for some evidence of the death of Dare-Devil Dan. But they could see nothing assuring them that he was dead, and Redtop swore by all the saints above and below that he wouldn't believe the boy was dead until he could see a body lying stiff and stark before him, "with the devil's certificate that it was Dare-Devil Dan's, and no squackin'."

From his perch in the tree, Dan heard this declaration of the loud-mouthed Redtop, and could not help smiling when he thought how different the fellow had grown since he "piped" so lustily for mercy but a few hours before in the cabin.

Finally, as the glow of the embers died out, the savages began to scatter out here and there and wrapping their blankets around them lie down upon the ground to rest.

Soon all the red-skins were asleep except Little Bear, who sat down with the outlaws under a tree for a consultation. When this talk had ended the chief arose, wrapped his blanket about him, and went and laid down under a tree and was soon sound asleep.

The defeated, outwitted outlaws could not sleep. Their conscience troubled them. They sat together discussing their blunders and the terrible visitation of death that had decimated their ranks. But they had great hopes of the future. What they had failed to accomplish, Little Bear promised them he could and would do. They had no fears of the fugitives getting away that night from the vicinity of the lake, and in the morning fifty Indians would be let loose to hunt them down.

Thus another hour was spent. A sort of a red twilight from the glaring coals pervaded the surrounding. Redtop sat with his eyes in the direction of the sleeping chief, wondering to himself whether the author of all their troubles, Dare-Devil Dan, had really perished in the flames. While thus engaged he saw a dark ball drop from the tree over Little Bear, strike the slumbering chief in the stomach and bound off into the darkness, but not before he had seen it assume human proportions—recognized it as the very subject of his thoughts, Dare-Devil Dan, the Boy Ranger.

A cry as if of mortal pain was forced from the chief's lips, and flinging aside his blanket he clasped his stomach and rolled over and over, groaning with agony.

Like a deer Redtop sprung to his feet. In sharp, shrill notes he gave the alarm.

Quickly every savage sprung to his feet.

Redtop gave them the trail, and they swarmed away through the woods like bloodhounds.

But as well might they have pursued the wind as Dare Devil Dan. The fearless youth ran along the beach within the dense shadows. He had not gone far when a familiar voice hailed him. He stopped and looked around.

He saw three forms approaching, and demanded:

"Who comes there?"

"Me, Rosebud Benjamin, Solomon Warren, and Philip Gregg."

"Shake, yards," said Dan, "how's the other folks?"

"All safe," replied Rosebud, "but let's put to sea, for that music by Little Bear's band is gittin' uncomfortably close."

They hurried to where they had left the canoe and embarked for the island, and although the moon was shining, they escaped detection by the red-skies.

"Boy," said Rosebud, as they glided over the moonlit waters, "it seems to us that you had a leetle foretaste of the brimstun pit. How is it? War that you playin' shuttlecock between the flames on the roof of the cabin?"

"It was," replied Dan, and then he narrated his adventure in the cabin and on the roof and in the tree, as we have described it. "But," he continued, "when it come to getting out of that tree, with a sleeping chief under it, and eight or ten foaming mad outlaws sitting near by wide awake, it was a leetle ticklish, but as the foliage hung low along the tree-trunk, I started down aiming to keep on the side from the outlaws; but just as I reached the lower limb my foot slipped, and I swung around and fell plump into the bosom of that dreaming chief, and from the yoop that escaped his lips, I should say I bu'sted the great man. Well, to make it short, I lit out of there like a jack-rabbit and—well, here I am."

"Yes, and here we are," said Old Rosebud, as the island to which he was steering appeared but a short ways before.

In a few minutes more they had landed on the island and joined their friends, who received them with the most joyful demonstration.

Cordelia was perfectly indifferent to the news of the Boy Ranger's escape. In fact, she seemed quite indifferent, in her sorrow, to everything around her. She conversed but little, so completely broken and crushed was her proud spirit. Out of respect for her feelings, Old Rosebud and Dan, whom all believed she hated, addressed no words to her, nor did they make any remark in her hearing tending to touch her feelings.

A consultation as to what should be done with the girl was held, and it was unanimously decided that Cordelia might decide the matter herself, and that if she wished to leave the country, she should do so under their protection.

Adrian was finally sent to her, to inform her of the result of the consultation and ask her to express her wish in the matter.

"Adrian," she replied, "will you please tell Sol Warren that I wish to speak with him? I will inform him of my wish."

Adrian turned away, and found Sol, to whom she gave Cordelia's message.

Sol at once proceeded to where the girl sat. She asked him to be seated. He sat down by her side. They conversed for fully an hour, then Sol arose and came back to his friends in waiting.

"Well?" said Old Rosebud.

"She desires to go back to the shore," Sol said, "place herself under the protection of Little Bear until she can arrange matters so as to go to her father's people, who reside in St. Paul. She is utterly heartbroken, and says she feels with keen remorse the sins of her father. Poor girl, I pity her from the bottom of my heart, and although it was by her orders that I was to be brought to this very island and shot, she now asks me to escort her from here back to the shore, and I have promised to do so."

"Boy, look out that her tears and soft words ain't another electric battery to place you in her power," said Rosebud.

"I have no fears of her now. I know she speaks the truth. She is humble and penitent. She acknowledged that she had tried to slay us all, but that it was all done in a passion of madness."

"And why won't she talk to all o' us as she does to you, boy?" Old Ben inquired.

"I don't know," was Sol's reply.

"I do," was Rosebud's answer, as he nudged Scott Vail; "bet it's a love affa'r between them." The last words were spoken aside to Vail.

"As I have promised to take her ashore, I shall depart at once," Warren said.

"Sol," said Adrian, "are you not afraid they will kill you when you go ashore?"

"Cordelia has pledged me her word that though every outlaw and savage is present when we land, not a hair of my head shall be harmed if I will trust her, and I do."

"The boy's got it bad, I do believe," said Rosebud; "why, I wouldn't risk my carcass that way in reach of them demons for all Dakota, promise or no promise."

Sol informed the girl that he was ready to

depart, and throwing her shawl hoodlike over her head she advanced to where Adrian stood and taking her hand said:

"Good-by, Adrian—perhaps forever. I hope you will forgive me if I have in word or act wronged you. I am going to my friends and with God's mercy, try and live a better life. Pray for me, Adrian, for I know God will hear your prayer."

Here she broke down and sobbed as if her heart would break. All were touched with pity by her emotions. But presently she brushed away her tears and raising her white face that looked strangely beautiful in the mellow moonlight she said, addressing all:

"Men, one and all I humbly implore your forgiveness. But a few days ago, I, your avenging Nemesis, sought your lives; but I thank Heaven for the result, for no innocent blood is upon my head. I promise you now that so far as my father's followers, or those that live, and Little Bear's warriors are concerned, no harm shall befall you in your journey out of this country. I know my influence with them and can safely make you this promise as partial amends for the wrongs done. All I ask of you is your forgiveness of the past."

"That you have, my little gal, and may God bless you, are the prayers o' Old Rosebud," and the old hunter advanced, and taking her hand spoke in a tone deep with emotion.

Then one by one the others came up and pledged her their entire forgiveness and wished her a safe journey to her friends and a life of happiness.

"Farewell," she said when the last one had spoken to her, and then taking Sol's arm she was conducted to one of the boats, and soon the two were gliding out over the moonlit waters toward the western shore.

Their approach was discovered when fifty rods from the beach, and by the time the boat touched at a landing every outlaw and savage had congregated there.

Cordelia's return was received with prolonged shouts and yells of joy.

In the very face of all Sol Warren boldly stepped from the boat and assisted the girl on shore.

"Hooray!" shouted Redtop, "she's brought that big skunk that tied us back with her a prisoner, and now for—"

"Men, and warriors!" cried Cordelia in a strong voice, her old-time sternness and resolution asserting themselves, "let not a hand touch this young man. I promised him that no harm should befall him if he accompanied me here, and he who offers to lay a hand on him shall suffer!"

"My gracious, Cordelia! what's come over you? Will you let that big wretch—"

"Not another word, Redtop," she commanded in an imperative tone, then turning to the chief, Little Bear, she continued: "Little Bear, I appeal to you to see that no harm befalls that brave young man."

Ever ready to do the beautiful woman's bidding Little Bear waved his warriors back, saying:

"Little Bear hears the white queen's words. Harm shall not come to the young white brave who brings her back to her people. Let all beware!"

This warning was enough. Disappointment became written on the faces of the outlaws, and the irrepressible Redtop turned away, muttering to himself.

Turning to her escort, Cordelia now said:

"Sol, I thank you—good-by."

"Good-by Cordelia," the young man said, then turning he stepped into the boat, and seating himself to k up the paddle and sent the craft gliding easily and gracefully across the water.

For several moments Cordelia stood, her back to the lake, watching with the eye of a hawk the group of outlaws and savages to see that no one attempted to fire upon Sol. But when assured that he was beyond danger she turned and glanced over the lake at the retreating boat, then burying her face in her hands, she fell upon her knees and burst into tears.

The Indians looked on in mute astonishment, while the outlaws swore in their beards.

The scene was a weird one—the moonlit waters, the dark green forest, the belt of yellow sand lying between, the kneeling, sobbing girl, and the grim, stoical savages—all conspired to make the picture grand and solemn.

But it lasted for only a few moments. The maiden arose and turned away; the warriors followed, and soon the solemn hush of night brooded along the shores of Devil's Lake.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST SURPRISE.

AFTER Sol's return to the island, and the little band of adventurers realized that they were safe once more, for the time being, at least, the greatest joy prevailed, and they began to make arrangements for their retreat from the scene of their adventures. Their horses were concealed in a canyon on the east side of the lake along with their hunting and camp equipage, and as soon as they had taken a short rest they embarked for the mainland.

They found their horses as they had left them, and, as there were three pack-horses in the outfit, Thomas Field and his daughter were furnished a couple of these.

By the time the party were in their saddles it was almost daylight, but the horses being fresh they pushed rapidly southward, and by the time the sun came up they were many miles from Devil's Lake.

Old Rosebud observed as much precaution as though the most imminent danger surrounded them. He had some doubts of Cordelia being able to hold the outlaws and red-skins in check, notwithstanding Sol's story of the wonderful power she seemed to exert over them. But after three days' traveling without seeing the sight of a savage or freebooter, every fear was dismissed, and from that time on the journey because one of no little pleasure.

When the Cheyenne river was reached they went into camp for a day or two of rest. Scott Vail was suffering some from the effect of his wound, which had been greatly aggravated by his long ride.

While here a herd of buffalo was sighted a few miles away, and leaping into their saddles, all but Sol and Adrian set off to hunt down the noble game.

All along the young men had vied with each other in acts of civility to Adrian and in contributing to her happiness and comfort; and if she had a favorite or a preference among them she concealed it with remarkable tact, which in fact, showed her good sense.

Scott Vail, however, had waited patiently for an opportunity to confess his love to her; and while the men were off after the buffalo he laid bare his heart secret. Adrian was greatly surprised, and before she could answer him, Dare-Devil Dan dashed into camp with the news of their success in killing a number of buffalo.

Shortly afterward the others came in with a nice supply of fresh buffalo meat.

After supper that evening Dan invited Vail to a walk. On the banks of the river they sat down, when Dan said:

"Scott, we might as well have our talk out that Old Rosebud and the panther so unceremoniously cut short a few days since, and have an understanding. You confessed to me and I to you that we loved Adrian Field."

"Yes," replied Vail.

"Well, one or the other must lose; but Scott, will it be by fair or foul means?"

"Fair, every time, Dan."

"I will tell you then what I will do upon my honor: you have your revolver, I have mine. We will shoot five shots each at that white spot on yonder tree, and he who puts the most bullets nearest the center is to have a clear field—the other withdrawing entirely."

"After all, Dan, Adrian will settle the matter," replied Scott; "love cannot be changed by the hazard of a few bullets fired at a target, and I have this to suggest that we go to Adrian and let her decide it herself."

"That suits me better, Scott, for it's the most manly way I confess—ah! here comes Adrian now. Let us speak with her."

Adrian was walking along the bank in a deep reverie and did not see the young rivals until Dan addressed her.

Scott Vail, in a very plain and honorable way all their troubles before her, and begged that she settle it as her heart dictated.

The maiden was not a little startled by this double proposal, but she soon recovered her composure and said:

"My dear young friends, you have both been very, very kind to me, and are worthy of the love of any girl living, but I hope it will not give you pain when I say that I cannot give my love to either."

"And is there no chance for hope?" Scott asked, as if loth to yield up his idol.

"None whatever," she answered; "for my hand and heart are pledged to another—your friend, Sol Warren."

"Lucky Sol," muttered Dare-Devil Dan, and then as Adrian moved away he turned to Scott and said:

"That settles it, old friend—big-hearted Sol Warren has drawn the prize."

Looking vaguely away across the river with a look of regret on his handsome face, Scott Vail replied:

"Ah, well! for us all some sweet hope lies, Deeply buried from human eyes."

THE END.

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